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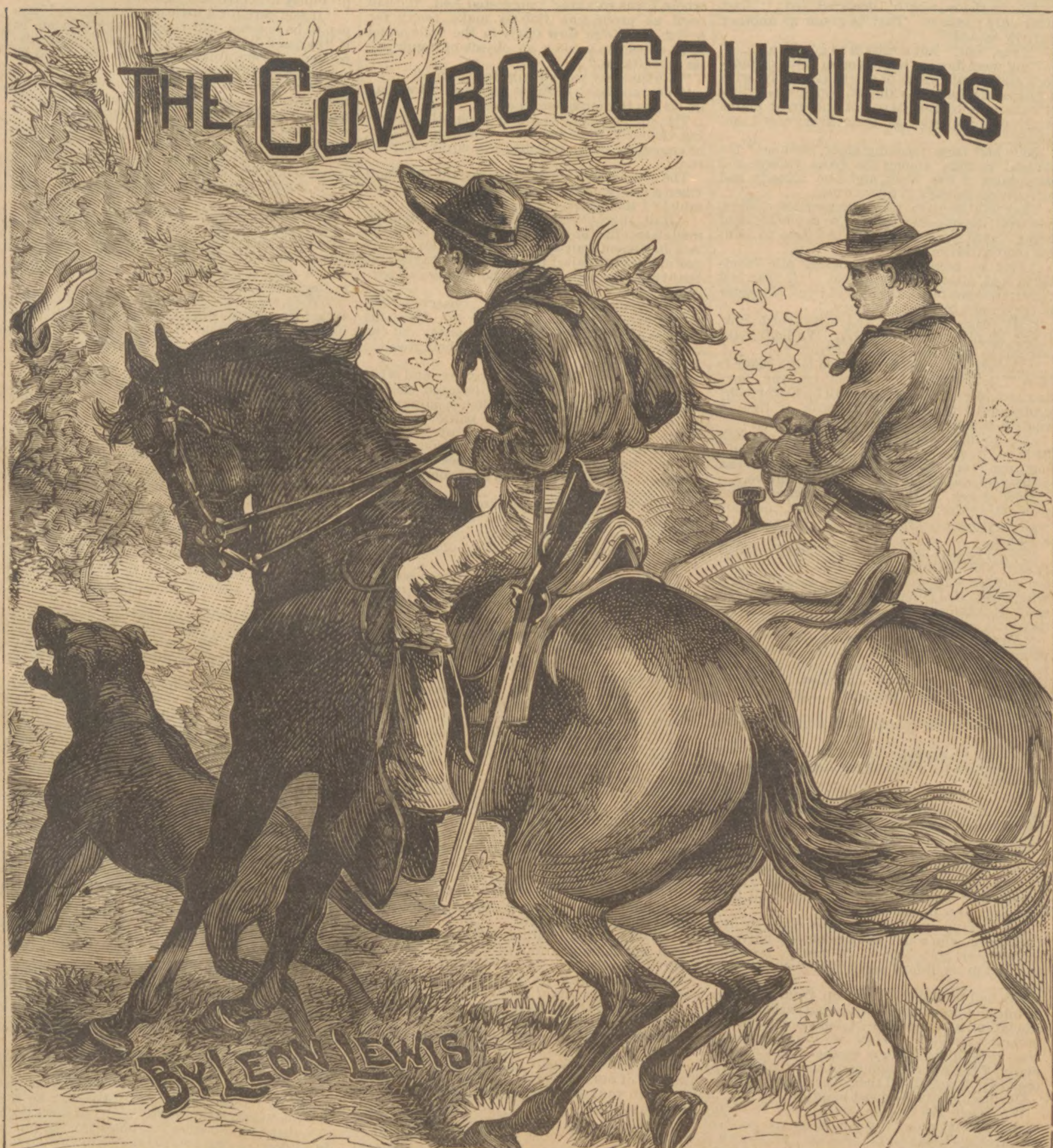
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"HALT, THERE!" WAS THE STERN COMMAND, FROM THE COVER—WITH WHICH ORDER THE TWO COURIERS QUICKLY COMPLIED.

The Cowboy Couriers;

OR,

The Rustlers of the Big Horn.

BY LEON LEWIS,

AUTHOR OF "DAREDEATH DICK," "THE WATER GHOUL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

IN A DANGEROUS SITUATION.

NEAR the close of a pleasant summer day, a few years ago, a couple of young men, well-armed and well-mounted, with a huge black mastiff at their heels, were riding at full gallop on a lonely trail in the Big Horn Valley, now and then looking back, as if pursued or apprehensive of pursuers.

"We've shaken 'em off again, Bob," at length remarked one of the two, with a sigh of relief, as he slung his rifle across his back.

"It looks that way, Ned," returned the other, with a countenance which attested that he fully shared the relief experienced by his companion. "I've seen nothing of them since we left that last ford. I can't imagine where all these red-skins come from, nor what they are."

"They must be Crows, who have left their Reservation in Montana to take a little recreation upon the war-path," declared Ned. "Blast their ugly pictures! They've given us another narrow escape!"

"True, Ned. But a miss is as good's a mile."

They were daring, noble young fellows, nineteen and twenty years of age respectively, with a fair education, the value of which was greatly enhanced by the flavor of the great plains which was apparent in their every word and action.

They had been "seeking their fortunes" for several months among the great valleys and mountains of the West, and had already had adventures enough to fill volumes.

They had been in turn prospectors, miners, cowboys, deputy-sheriffs, etc., to say nothing of being forced a good share of the time to hunt for their subsistence.

"Pity we haven't yet made our pile," muttered Ned, after another pause. "If that last remittance has failed to come to hand my sister is very much in want of money."

"My case, exactly, Ned," returned Bob. "But, let us hope for the best. We shall make our pile in due time, I do not doubt."

"The elder, Ned Wharton, had left a sister in New York State, for whom he was very anxious to earn money, as will be better comprehended when we come to speak of the circumstances in which she was placed."

The younger, Bob Carpenter, had a whole brood of juvenile brothers and sisters depending upon him, he having lost his parents several years previous to the date of our narrative.

How eager the adventurous young men were, therefore, to "make their piles," and how well they deserved to make them, is apparent at a glance.

"We'd better slacken our pace now," suddenly said Ned, suiting the action to the word, after another long glance in the direction from which they had come. "We're rid of the red-skins—for the moment at least—and it will not do to run our horses off their legs."

"I agree with you," assented Bob, who had promptly conformed to his comrade's example, as had the dog. "We must keep them well in hand, as we may be compelled to ride for our lives at any moment. Isn't that so, Demon?"

The concluding question was addressed to the dog.

"That's so, my boys!" was the dog's answer, accompanied by a toss of the head and a wag of the tail.

This dog was a wonder in his way—such a marvel of strength, speed and endurance, so intelligent and sagacious, as to be almost as companionable as a human being.

Naturally, he had not yet developed to the extent of being, like man, a talking animal, although he could walk on his hind legs and do many other wonderful tricks, as we shall have occasion to see in due course.

The talking in this case was done by Bob Carpenter, who could have achieved universal renown as a ventriloquist, he having possessed this gift in its utmost perfection from his childhood.

Bob had brought the dog up from a puppy, devoting a great deal of time and patience to its education, and the rapport between them had become singularly perfect—so much so that it was very difficult for a stranger to detect in many of their performances where the work of the big boy ended and that of the dog began.

One peculiarity we must mention.

Whenever the dog apparently felt the voice of the ventriloquist thrown upon his head he would shake his ear and move his lips in such a way as to greatly favor the supposition that he was the author of the remark uttered.

So often had the word *demon* been applied to

him, and so often had it been said that a demon must be in him or help him, that the name had finally been adopted as his patronymic.

"About time to halt for the night, isn't it?" resumed Ned, after a brief silence, as he glanced at the dog's panting tongue.

"Yes, Ned. See how tired Demon is!" The dog drew his tongue into his mouth, returning the glances bent upon him.

"Speak for yourselves!" was the response that came from him.

Any one witnessing the performance for the first time would have been almost willing to make oath that the dog had really spoken.

Of course Bob was not doing these things for a vain show.

He was simply keeping himself "on edge"—the dog also—so as to be ready to turn his ventriloquism to account at any desired moment, as he had so often done before, and as he expected and intended to do often again.

The two young mountain adventurers had ridden but a short distance after bringing their horses to a walk—not long enough to find an attractive spot for their proposed halt—when the dog pricked up his ears and bounded toward a wooded knoll just ahead of them, thus communicating a sense of danger to the horses and to their riders.

"He sees or scents something," said Bob, hurriedly, as he swung his rifle from his shoulder to his hand. "Another batch of red-skins!"

"More likely some of those gatekeepers of whom I was speaking," suggested Ned, who had been as prompt as Bob to make ready for action. "We're now fairly in the valley, and must expect to become an object of inquiry to its inhabitants."

"Fortunately we're ready for them—" "Yes, and have business here, so that we can do no less than take our chances."

The dog had come to a halt promptly, growling viciously, his every hair bristling with excitement, as he glared into the cover in question.

The couple had arrived abreast of the knoll when a man raised himself into view from the midst of its bushes.

"Halt, there!" was the stern command, as he made a significant gesture, with which order the two horsemen quietly complied, the stranger's gesture having called their attention to the fact that they were covered by the muzzles of several rifles.

"At your service, you see," observed Ned, with a careless smile, as Demon sat down, his glances alternating between his master and the unknown. "In what way can we be agreeable to you, stranger?"

"Simply by telling us who you are and what your business is hereabouts," declared the unknown, as he left his concealment, advancing toward the horsemen. "My name is Harewood. You may not have heard of me, but I am the newly-elected sheriff of this county."

The young men exchanged glances of comprehension. They had expected to encounter some such personage sooner.

They divined that the pretended sheriff was a road-agent, a fugitive from justice, or some other outlaw, who had taken it upon himself to know more of their affairs before allowing them to proceed further.

The entire Big Horn Valley had been so long shunned by honest men and sought by rogues that such an encounter as the present could not well have been delayed longer.

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Harewood," returned Ned. "Are we to understand by your presence here that we're following a dangerous trail?"

"Not at all, gentlemen," said Harewood, his glances searching the strangers and their equipments as rapidly as comprehensively. "I'm merely looking for a couple of men who are hiding hereabouts. Where are you going?"

"Nowhere in particular. We're simply looking for a white antelope."

"For what?" and Harewood scowled as if suspicious of being trifled with.

"For a white antelope."

"A white nigger!" cried the pretended sheriff contemptuously. "What're you giving us? There is no such critter as a white antelope in existence—never was, never will be!"

"Nevertheless, it is asserted that one was seen by a hunter last summer on one of the upper forks of No Wood Creek."

"Well, the chap telling that story must have been the champion liar of the Territory," declared Harewood. "Do you mean to say that you two're green enough to start out on any such errand as a hunt for a white antelope?"

"That's the very idea we wish to convey," asserted Ned, with smiling politeness. "The newspapers of the country have spoken at some length of this matter. For instance, here is a Helena paper, which will not only give further details of our enterprise, but will also serve to prove to your satisfaction the good faith of all we are saying."

Producing the newspaper in question, Ned unfolded it with quiet deliberation and called the attention of the pretended sheriff to a marked paragraph therein.

"Read that," he added.

Harewood hastened to comply.

The paragraph was as follows:

"We learn that Dr. Kellogg, the public-spirited proprietor of the 'Zoo,' has offered \$20,000 for a white antelope, a living specimen of which rare animal is said to have been seen by a hunter last summer upon the head waters of Snell Creek, in the Big Horn Valley, Wyoming. Tempted by this liberal offer, two young gentlemen of Ohio, Hiram Stokes and Nathaniel Skinner, have resolved to start for Wyoming next Monday, with a view to the capture of the great curiosity in question. Good luck go with them!"

The look of scorn and disgust with which the pretended sheriff finished reading this item would have made the fortune of any painter capable of transferring it to canvas.

"You two are the Stokes and Skinner mentioned in this squib, I suppose?" he queried, returning the newspaper.

Ned assented.

"A precious pair! If the coyotes don't eat you before you get out of the Territory, the wasps'll sting you to death and build you into their nests. A white antelope! Hey, boys!" and Harewood looked around to his men, tossing his arms excitedly. "See here!"

The men in concealment lost no time in responding to the summons, surrounding their leader and the travelers.

"Happy to meet you, gentlemen," greeted Ned, nodding from one to another. "Will you smoke?"

He produced some choice cigars, which were promptly accepted and lighted.

"If you care for a little choice brandy, I happen to have some, and you are very welcome to it," pursued Ned, as he drew a flask from a side-pocket. "Some folks don't care for it, to be sure, during this hot weather—"

"But we're not that kind, are we, boys?" interrupted the pretended sheriff, as he extended his hand for the flask. "If it were not for the politeness of these young chaps, I'd say they're the blamest pair of idyuts that were ever turned loose to browse for a living! What do you think they're after in the Big Horn Valley? Simply looking for a white antelope. Ha, ha!"

The entire posse of the pretended sheriff joined in his merriment, making the air ring around them, but this circumstance did not in the least distract their attention from the flask of brandy, which was nearly empty when it was returned to the hands of its owner.

"Well, we now understand each other," asserted Harewood, with a countenance quite unlike the grim visage with which he had appeared upon the scene. "You can ride on, gentlemen."

"Thanks, Mr. Harewood," returned Ned. "We wish you good-day, and success in getting all your antelopes, whatever may be their color."

And with this the horsemen rode quietly away, the mastiff following them.

Once or twice they looked back with a friendly wave of the hand, but at the end of a minute they were shut from the view of their interceptors by a bend in the trail.

"You see how easy it is to control dangerous men, Bob," then said Ned. "All you have to do is to satisfy their curiosity, suspicion or other dominant sentiments. These fellows, for instance, are perfectly sure that they know all about us, and we are little better than 'idyuts' in their sight!"

"Long may they be of that opinion," ejaculated young Carpenter, with a keen twinkle in his eyes. "It's clear enough that we haven't wasted our money in causing that newspaper squib to be printed."

"Of course those chaps are outlaws and cut-throats of the worst description," remarked Ned, thoughtfully. "They're simply a picket of some large band we may stumble upon at any moment. We may accept our encounter with them as a hint that we are now getting face to face with some of the difficulties of the task we have undertaken."

Continuing to advance, the explorers came to a brook with shallow bed and low banks.

It was fringed with trees, but not heavily enough to interfere with the task of fording it.

Upon the nearest bank sat a figure which at once fixed the attention of the horsemen.

It was that of a young woman whose features would have been considered beautiful if they had been indicative of an honest life or heart.

She sat beside a wagon which had received some damage, and to which some broken fragments of harness were clinging.

"Ah, gentlemen," she cried, in a not unmusical voice, as she arose and turned toward the travelers with well-simulated joy, "you're just in time to assist me out of a very awkward dilemma. I cannot believe that I shall appeal to you in vain."

"Certainly not," answered Ned, drawing rein.

"I live a few miles ahead of you, as house-keeper to Father Sproul, a missionary to the Indians," proceeded the woman. "I have been on a visit to a cousin, a few miles up the Gray Bull River. I had arrived near this spot on my return when my horse became frightened and ran away, throwing me out and breaking clear of

the wagon. Will you kindly hitch one of your horses to the vehicle and take me home?"

"With much pleasure," answered Ned, "provided your runaway horse has left enough of his harness behind him for that purpose."

An investigation resulted favorably, enough of the broken harness being found to serve as a makeshift, with the aid of sundry pegs and strings.

Bob having devoted his horse to the work in hand, it was only natural that he should take his place beside the strange woman, after he had assisted her to the seat she had so unceremoniously vacated.

"You may take the lead," said Ned, as he resumed possession of his saddle. "Of course the lady will give you all necessary particulars in regard to the route."

The little party was soon in motion, the dog following the wagon closely, and Ned bringing up the rear.

"I forgot to mention that my name is Mrs. Crump," observed the woman, after the wagon had rolled a short distance beyond the brook. "I do not remember to have ever seen you before. Do you live in the neighborhood?"

"No, Mrs. Crump. We're hunters."

"From the East, I presume?"

Bob nodded.

"Any friends or relatives hereabouts?"

Bob shook his head, with a glance over his shoulder, as if to assure himself of the dog's whereabouts.

"You're not going to the Pacific Slope?"

"Not if we know it," and there was an intonation in Bob's voice which attested that he began to find this string of questions irksome.

"Excuse me, if I seem garrulous," said Mrs. Crump, with a simper. "It is so seldom that I see any one to talk to."

A brief interval of silence succeeded, Bob giving his attention to the difficulties of the rough trail.

Always watchful and guarded, and now particularly alive to their surroundings, the two adventurers had not taken the woman's statement with implicit trust, but had promptly conceived a suspicion that she might be a designing and dangerous plotter, and that it would be quite within the range of possibility for her to develop some daring and sinister game.

"She's a decoy!" concluded Bob. "But for whom? Into what trap will she take us?"

Looking back, he saw that Ned was evidently of the same opinion, as was shown by the fact that he had unslung his rifle so as to be ready for any act of treachery.

"Do you know Father Sproul?" was her next question.

"Never heard of him until you mentioned his name," answered Bob frankly.

"That shows what strangers you are," declared Mrs. Crump, with an assumption of smiling ease which did not conceal her serious preoccupations. "Father Sproul is one of the oldest settlers in the Territory. He has been a missionary to the Indians more than twenty years, so that he is very widely known."

"Is he still a missionary?" asked Bob.

"Well—no," returned Mrs. Crump. "He has become somewhat incapacitated by age, and most of the Indians, you know, have been gathered upon the Reservations."

"We saw a couple to-day whom we left to be gathered by the coyotes, after putting a leaden pill into their stomachs," announced Bob, a streak of his cowboy humor lighting up his fearless, handsome face. "Considering Father Sproul's long residence in the land, it seems rather singular that there should still be so many members of his flock ready to kill us at sight!"

Mrs. Crump flushed.

"Where was that?" she asked.

Bob gave her the particulars.

"You surprise me," she declared. "I had not heard that the Indians were making trouble. They may have mistaken you for some one else."

"It's possible," answered Bob, with an incredulous smile, "but we took them for just what they were. We saw other red-skins yesterday who seemed much too anxious to make our acquaintance."

The information tended to make Mrs. Crump nervous and uneasy.

"I must speak to Father Sproul about them," she said, "and in excuse of their conduct I can only say that there are many Indians in the Territory who have never been under Father Sproul's ministrations and for whom he is in no wise responsible. There are many Indians who have settled down as farmers and otherwise, in out-of-the-way places, who are no better than murderers and robbers."

"No doubt, madam, and it is safe to say that many of the white settlers in these solitudes are no better than their red brothers."

Mrs. Crump flushed again, which fact did not escape the notice of her escort, and they began to take a keen interest in her.

Who and what was she?

What were her schemes?

The trail the travelers were following was as rude and rough as the mountain scenery around it. It had evidently been made by the feet of

buffaloes and other wild animals, during countless ages, rather than by the hand of man. As a rule, it followed the windings of the Big Horn, near which it ran, now upon one bank, and now upon the other. Towering cliffs, dense forests, and lonely ravines—these were everywhere the inevitable characteristics of every landscape meeting the eye.

"There, the road will be better now," at length ejaculated Mrs. Crump. "As you see, sir, we have reached a regular worked trail."

"It's even so," returned Bob, with undisguised wonder. "Some one has taken the trouble to spend considerable labor upon it."

"And of course these public benefactors have reaped their reward in the usual way," pursued Mrs. Crump, with a smile. "In other terms, they have built a toll-gate, and exact tribute from all who pass."

"Odd, is it not, for this wild region?" remarked Bob to Ned, who had been attentively following the conversation.

"Very," was the answer.

The little party soon came to a divide in the roads.

"My route lies to the left," explained Mrs. Crump.

"We should have taken the other, sticking to the river," observed Bob. "But it does not matter. The roads must intersect later."

"Ah, there's the toll-gate!" suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Crump, as the wagon passed a slight bend in the road. "It's mean to tax us, but we save two miles by coming this way, the road cutting across the neck of a great bend in the river."

The toll-gate had been built in the usual form, that is to say, thrown directly across the road, all the central part of its second story overhanging the passageway left for traffic.

A high gate, which was arranged to draw up, being balanced by weights, effectually barred this opening.

"I will pay," announced Mrs. Crump, producing a purse from her pocket, as the wagon rolled up to the toll-gate.

"Permit me to execute that little formality," interposed Bob. "That will be better."

As the wagon came to a halt at the barrier, an old woman emerged from a side door in silence and received the amount called for by the tariff posted at the entrance.

Then she raised the gate and the travelers resumed progress.

The next instant, however, a couple of slip-nooses flew from traps in the second story, immediately over the heads of the two adventurers, and were drawn tightly about their bodies, and then both Ned and Bob were drawn swiftly upward—the one from his saddle and the other from the wagon-seat—both vanishing through the trap, which closed behind and beneath them.

CHAPTER II.

NEW KINDS OF DETECTIVES.

In vain Ned and Bob struggled. They were as helpless as a dozen stout hands, taking them at such disadvantage, could make them.

The slip-nooses which had encircled their bodies were removed as soon as they had been securely bound, and then they were laid upon the floor, their captors departing by a door at one end of the apartment—which apartment comprised the entire second story of the toll-gate house.

It had ten or twelve windows, including two at each end, so that it was extremely well lighted.

It contained no furniture whatever.

The trap-doors through which the prisoners had been so deftly drawn were visible in the floor.

"Well, here's a pretty kettle of fish," growled Ned, with inexpressible disgust and vexation. "Were ever two gudgeons hooked more quickly?"

"Easy, old fellow," returned Bob. "I admit that we are 'taken in' and in a fair way to be 'done for,' but I deny that our situation can be imputed to any carelessness or rashness. We have simply experienced a Big Horn surprise. But this trick is one that no cleverness can guard against. It's decidedly new. It would readily catch the wariest detective in the world."

"And now for the motives underlying these too vigorous attentions," suggested Ned. "Can these extremely capable reprobates have received some hint in regard to our true character?"

"It's possible, although not likely. The probability is that we have been ensnared upon some general principle, which applies to everybody, and not for any personal reason."

"Poor Demon! Do you hear him?"

"Yes. He's uttering his distress in low whines at the foot of the staircase by which those rascals retreated."

"And that woman?" pursued Ned.

"She simply drove on, as I was snatched so suddenly from her side. Ah! some one is ascending the stairs!"

The prisoners almost held their breath as the footsteps they had heard rapidly gained their presence.

The new-comer was Harewood.

"What a pity!" was his comment upon the situation, as he advanced with a pocket-knife in his hand and began cutting the bonds of the prisoners. "I never saw such stupidity!"

He continued his comments and labors until both young men had been freed from their bonds and assisted to their feet.

"Excuse this outrage, boys," he resumed, offering a hand to each. "My chaps have mistaken you for the two rogues of whom I was speaking when I had the pleasure of meeting you an hour since. I hope you are not harmed?"

"Not in the least, thank you," returned Ned, heartily. "Need I say how very glad we are to see you again, Mr. Sheriff? Our sudden captivity is all a mistake, then?"

"Quite so—quite," assured Harewood; "and yet, it was perfectly natural, under the circumstances. I had given strict orders, you see, and even reported that the rogues were likely to appear in this quarter at the very moment of your arrival. A curious jumble of zeal and error—that's all. Will you forgive the mistake?"

"Say no more about it, Mr. Sheriff," said Bob, as graciously as possible. "No offense can be taken where none is intended. You are not the keeper of this place?"

"No, sir; I simply chanced to be passing on my way home, when word was brought me of your capture. I live about two miles from here—further down the Valley. You see that night is at hand," he added, with a glance from the windows. "Of course you must stay somewhere until morning, and why not go home with me?"

"We shall do so with the greatest pleasure," assented Ned, after consulting Bob with a glance. "But what about Mrs. Crump? Who and what is she, Mr. Harewood?"

"My only daughter, gentlemen—a good, brave girl, who has lately taken a great deal of interest in playing detective. Of course you will tell me all about her little performance later, and not be too hard upon her for her blunder. She really believed you to be the famous pair of rogues who have kept us all sleepless for a week past. Come, gentlemen, I would like to get home before dark," and he turned and led the way down-stairs.

The delight with which Demon received his young master so strangely torn from him was touching.

The horses of the young explorers were standing in the yard of the toll-gate house, as was that of the pretended sheriff, and the two lost no time in mounting and taking their departure, Mr. Harewood leading the way and Demon bringing up the rear.

As already indicated, the shadows of the coming night were glooming the dense woods and lonely ravines bordering the route, and the scene around the horsemen became more and more somber from one moment to another.

At the end of a brisk ride of twelve or fifteen minutes the two reached the mouth of a branch of the Big Horn which runs almost parallel with it for a considerable distance.

The peninsula between the two waters, a patch of twenty-five or thirty acres of alluvium, is nearly level, and less than ten feet above the rivers.

Near the extremity of this peninsula, in a good position to overlook both streams and the adjacent shores, stood the residence of Harewood, in the midst of a large clearing, with a dense forest stretching away indefinitely to the rear of it.

It was one of those dwellings of squared logs, which form such admirable abodes in any climate for either summer or winter, they being as well adapted to keeping out the cold of one season as the heat of the other.

It was reached readily only from one side of the tributary, across which had been thrown a rustic bridge strong enough to support any weight likely to be placed upon it.

The bridge was so keyed and braced that one man with an ax could have precipitated it into the water at a moment's notice—a fact which suggested that the occupants of the place had not been unmindful of the old injunction: "In time of peace prepare for war."

Numerous horses, cattle and cows were upon the premises—especially the former.

As Harewood reached the open space in front of his house and dismounted, his guests following his example, a man made his appearance from the stables—a long row of low buildings at the rear of the clearing, with their backs to the great forest and their flanks to the rivers.

"These gentlemen will pass the night with me, Griff," said the pretended sheriff, "and I want you to take the best of care of their horses."

"All right, sir," said the man, saluting the guests respectfully, and taking charge of the horses, he hastened in the direction of the stables, while Harewood led the way into the house.

The interior of the dwelling was as plain as the exterior, but it gave every promise of comfort.

"Be seated, gentlemen," invited Harewood, entering a cosy sitting-room overlooking the

Big Horn. "I will look after affairs here a few moments, and then come back to you. Meanwhile, no doubt, Mrs. Crump will make her appearance."

He had scarcely withdrawn when the fair decoy appeared in the doorway by which the pretended sheriff had departed.

She came in with downcast eyes and with a vivid color upon her cheeks—her whole mien as apparently timid and deprecating as if she had been the object of some serious accusation.

The young men hastened to put her at her ease.

"Your father has explained matters, Mrs. Crump," said Ned, as kindly as gallantly, as he advanced and took her hand. "It seems that you have been looking for a pair of dangerous rogues for several days past, and that you mistook us—"

"Oh, excuse me, I beg of you," pleaded the woman, with well-acted confusion. "I shall never forgive myself for being so foolish. I allowed my zeal as an amateur detective to outrun my discretion. If I had really taken a good look at you—"

She sunk gracefully into a chair and covered her face with her hands, with a long-drawn sigh of regret and depression.

"Never mind," encouraged Bob, taking a seat near her. "Some of the best friendships in the world have been begun under even more awkward circumstances than ours. Permit us to hope that we will be the best of friends."

With his cowboy freedom, he seized one of the fair decoy's hands and raised it to his lips.

"How good of you!" she murmured, as she turned her face toward him, her eyes beaming brightly. "I may consider myself forgiven, then? Rest assured that I shall never cease to be grateful for your very generous indulgence."

A vigorous scratching was heard at the door.

"Ah, that splendid dog," exclaimed Mrs. Crump, springing to her feet and giving Demon admittance. "I never saw such a beauty!"

"Perhaps not," returned Bob, "but that is no reason why he should force his way into the sitting-room—"

"Oh, let him remain," and Mrs. Crump resumed her seat, drawing the dog's head into her lap. "I do so like such a great, knowing dog."

"You'll find him worthy of your regard. He's a very great friend of the ladies. Isn't such the case, Demon?"

"Naturally enough!" came from the dog.

Mrs. Crump uttered a shriek, and started so violently that Demon hastened to take refuge under a table at one side of the apartment.

"Why, he can talk!" she cried.

"Talk? Of course I can talk," came from under the table. "But, I'll say no more till after supper!"

Mrs. Crump sat as if petrified, staring at the dog in a speechless amazement approaching consternation.

"Why, didn't you ever see a talking dog before, Mrs. Crump?" asked Bob.

"N-never," gasped the decoy.

"That's because you live in these far-away solitudes," explained Bob. "Talking dogs are getting to be almost as common as bearded women," he added, mischievously. "You've heard of the Hindoo doctrine of the transmigration of souls?"

"Of course. A mere savage superstition—"

"Don't say that, Mrs. Crump. It's hard to say just where the possible ends and the impossible begins. It's agreed that all birds and animals have their own language, and if such is the case they are certainly capable of learning ours. This dog, however, I may as well add, is supposed to be possessed by the spirit of Jellheebay Jellheebay, a learned Brahmin, who lived several thousand years ago."

"Are you serious, sir?"

"Do I look like a trifler, Mrs. Crump? By the way, I forgot to tell you who we are, and your father may have been too busy to mention our names. I am Hiram Stokes and my friend is Nathaniel Skinner."

"Father mentioned your names, Mr. Stokes, although I did not know how they were divided between you," and she smiled. "If you will excuse me now a few moments, gentlemen," and she arose, "I will light up and look after the supper. Here are books and papers, and I do hope you will make yourselves quite at home."

The first measure of the young explorers, on being left to themselves, was to compare impressions, which they did in guarded whispers, as if mindful of the old saying that walls have ears.

They concluded to suspend judgment upon both Mrs. Crump and the pretended sheriff; in other terms, they could not yet decide whether they were dealing with honest people or with villains.

Mrs. Crump returned promptly, with the announcement that supper was ready.

"Demon shall have his later," said Bob, his glances following the direction taken by those of the hostess. "I am too sharp set to bother with him until after my own wants have been attended to."

Leaving the dog where he was, Mrs. Crump led the way to the dining-room, which occupied an entire wing at one side of the principal dwelling.

Here the guests were presented to Mrs. Harewood, a woman of middle age, who had no especially distinguishing quality, unless it was her furtive regard, or the grim energy and capacity displayed upon her features.

A fire had been kindled in the large, deep fireplace, not merely to ward off the chill which is usually felt in the evening air of the Big Horn Mountains, but also to lend a hospitable glow to the apartment.

The pretended sheriff soon came back to his guests, entering at a side door, and exchanged a few additional remarks with them.

He was about to turn his attention to the table, which was loaded with tempting supplies, when a shrill whistle resounded beyond the bridge by which the guests had crossed the tributary river.

The effect was electrical, the Harewoods all starting violently and flushing with joy.

"It's Ben," cried the host. "The bridge is closed. I will give him admittance."

He hastily vanished.

"Ben is Mr. Crump, my husband," explained Mrs. Crump, roseate with emotion. "He has arrived from Helena."

"From Helena," whispered Bob to Ned, with a shade of anxiety on his face, as the mother and daughter stepped to the door to receive the new-comer. "Can Mr. Crump have seen us there or followed us hither?"

The question seemed to preoccupy the two intently as they stood staring vacantly into the fire.

In the mean time Harewood had reached the bridge, across which was now thrown a stout, heavily-ironed gate, which turned on massive hinges, and which was certainly capable of rendering great service in the way of keeping intruders out of the peninsula.

"It's really you, Ben?" cried Harewood, shaking hands over the gate with the man outside of it. "Delighted to see you! Your letter reached us two or three days ago, and since then we have been in a fever of anxiety and apprehension. You simply mentioned, you'll remember, that two of the best detectives in Montana were to be sent into the Big Horn region to solve various outstanding problems, including one or two of ours, and we've all been on the watch night and day for the promised pair, with the intention of making short work of them! Have they left Helena?"

"No doubt," replied Ben Crump, as he led his jaded horse past the gate, which Harewood had unlocked and opened while speaking. "I have delayed my return a few days, in the hope of getting more information about them, but the event has not responded to my wishes."

"What sort o' cattle are they?" asked Harewood, as he closed the gate and locked it.

"I cannot say," answered Crump, resigning his horse to Griff, who had come from the stables. "About all I know is that they are two in number. They're probably oldish fellows, with huge beards and spectacles. They're new members, in fact, of the Helena Detective Association, and I have not yet been able to make their personal acquaintance. Have you company?"

"Yes; a couple of boys, who've come here on a wild-goose chase—two innocents, who hardly know enough, in some respects, to be left without a nurse."

"Indeed! What sort of a wild-goose chase is it?"

"Why, they're looking for a white antelope that some fraud pretends to have seen last summer on Shell Creek! Did you ever hear of such greenies, Ben?"

"No, I never did," declared Ben, with smiling contempt, as the couple turned their steps toward the house. "You make me really curious to see them. Ah, Effie!"

Mrs. Crump came flying to his arms, receiving and giving a hearty embrace, and then Mrs. Harewood greeted her son-in-law with a proud and joyous mien which attested that her affection for him was confirmed by a fond admiration.

In good truth, Ben Crump was a superior sort of man for that wild region, both in education and appearance.

He was tall and finely-proportioned, and in the full maturity of his forces, not having reached his fortieth year. His hair and eyes were dark, his complexion deeply bronzed. The average observer would have pronounced him good-looking, but it would not have been difficult for a capable eye to find many sinister lines in his beauty.

"And how has my little girl been in my absence?" he asked, caressing his wife again, as she walked by his side with her arm around him.

"As dull and gloomy as I always was in your absence, Ben," was the answer.

"These boys of which your father has been telling me have not touched your heart?" pursued the husband, half-seriously, as if conscious that his wife was a little more susceptible

to new and novel associations than was desirable.

"Oh, it has hardly been an hour since I first saw them," answered Mrs. Crump, "and I only stumbled upon them because we were looking for the two terrible detectives who are making an attempt to smoke us out, as you said in your letter. They seem to be very nice young fellows, however, and they have a most wonderful dog, a great, black, handsome creature, which can talk like you or I, Ben!"

"Which can talk? A talking dog, Effie?" queried Crump, laughing.

"Oh, but you'll hear him for yourself."

"Are these two young men from Helena?" pursued the husband, with sudden thoughtfulness.

"They are," answered Harewood. "There's a piece in a Helena paper about them and their white antelope."

"Ten to one I've seen them," declared Crump, with a flash of comprehension. "They're a couple of cowboys who attracted a great deal of attention in Helena, as did their dog. Good! They'll seem like old acquaintances."

The little party had now reached the entrance to the dining-room, from whence a flood of light beamed out upon them.

"Sure enough," whispered Ned to Bob, as the young explorers saw the face of the new-comer through the window. "He's one of those detectives who were pointed out to us by old Bramley. What's he doing here?"

There was no time to say more.

The door had opened, and the Harewoods were face to face with their guests.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE LEAF FROM THE PAST.

It proved as Ben Crump had said.

He met the guests of his father-in-law as one meets an old friend.

"Glad to see you again, gentlemen," he declared, with marked emphasis on the adverb, "and only regret that I did not get as far as a speaking acquaintance with you in Helena."

He caught the eye of Mrs. Harewood, who reminded him by a gesture that supper was waiting, and all took their places at table.

We need not detail the conversation with which the repast was seasoned; it led to no discovery in either direction.

The young men took good care not to betray that they knew Ben Crump to be a detective in good standing with the authorities and business men of Helena.

On the other hand, it did not even occur to any of the Harewoods to ask themselves if these interesting young strangers were not the two "terrible detectives" whose threatened advent into the Big Horn Valley had caused them such profound apprehensions.

Ben Crump did, indeed, make some inquiries about their stay in Helena, as about the parties with whom they had had dealings, but it required no effort on the part of the guests to answer these questions in such a way as to give every satisfaction without arousing the least suspicion.

After supper, Demon was introduced into the dining-room, where he became the center of all eyes, receiving many encomiums from Mrs. Crump and her mother.

The "feats" that succeeded, as the dog received his supper and ate it, were such as to scare the women, and even startle the pretended sheriff, but Ben Crump watched the performance with merely the interest of a professional.

"I've seen such things before," he said, in response to a playful reproach of his wife for his want of enthusiasm.

"In that case, he cannot be as wonderful as we supposed," remarked Bob, with sudden gravity. "I may as well kill him!"

While speaking, he drew a pistol from one of his pockets, leveled it at Demon, and pulled the trigger.

A flash and a report succeeded, and the dog, with a single yell, as of mortal agony, fell to the floor in an inert and motionless mass.

An instant of silent consternation followed.

"Oh, how cruel!" then cried Mrs. Crump, as she ran to the dog and knelt beside him, with a grief that was almost tearful. "How could you? Poor thing! He's dead!"

She raised one of the limp fore-paws of the animal, only to let it fall back to the floor with a lifelessness painful to witness.

"If he's dead," returned Bob, with apparent heartlessness, "all we have to do is to throw him into the river. Permit me."

Arising and crossing the floor, he seized the limp hind legs in a firm grasp, and drew the dog out of doors, without producing the least sign of life on the part of the patient.

He was absent a few moments—long enough to go to the creek and back. Then he found Mrs. Harewood and her daughter almost angry with him.

"Have you really thrown him into the river?" demanded the mother.

"Strange there is no blood on the floor," ejaculated the daughter.

"Is he really dead?" asked Harewood.

"That's the way in which he has retired from the scene every night for a year past," explained Bob complacently, as he resumed his seat.

"What! he feigns to be dead?" cried Mrs. Crump, with visible relief.

"As you have seen," answered Bob.

"A wonderful creature," exclaimed Mrs. Harewood. "I never saw anything like it. If that dog had lived a hundred years ago he would have been burned as a witch."

She arose and led the way to the sitting-room, where a couple of hours were passed in pleasant social intercourse, our young heroes making such inquiries about the adjacent country as to produce the impression on the part of their hearers that their one thought was to find a white antelope.

"It will be a long time before you find that rare animal and get your twenty thousand dollars for it. I'm thinking," at length said the pretended sheriff. "In the mean time, I dare say you are tired with the day's journeyings and will be glad to get to bed."

Ned admitted that the thought of retiring for the night had indeed presented itself.

"I will show you to your room," said Harewood, as he arose and took a lighted candle from the mantle-piece. "There's nothing you want before you leave us—a mouthful to eat or a drop to drink?"

"Nothing whatever, thank you," returned Ned.

"Perhaps you had better take your rifles to your room," suggested the host. "There are more or less red-skins prowling about, and it is well to be ready to receive them."

The adventurers appreciated the suggestion, the more especially as they had been debating with themselves how they could carry this very point without giving offense.

"You don't intend to leave that dog outdoors all night, I hope," observed Mr. Harewood. "Oh, no," replied Bob. "He always rooms with us."

Stepping to the door, he uttered a peculiar call, to which the dog instantly responded in person.

"Curious! curious!" cried Mrs. Harewood. "He's rightly named."

The pretended sheriff conducted his guests to an apartment over the dining-room, which was very neatly and tastefully furnished, and took his leave of them.

The night passed without incident, the young men sleeping so soundly that the sun was more than an hour high before they awoke.

An appetizing breakfast was served up to them in due course, and not long thereafter they resumed their journey, taking friendly leave of their entertainers, and accepting an invitation to call again whenever their affairs might bring them into the neighborhood.

Little was said by the couple while they were still within view from the Harewood dwelling; in fact, Ned seemed so gloomy and preoccupied, taking no notice of his comrade or of Demon, who was bringing up the rear, as usual, that Bob at length inquired the cause of his apparent sadness.

"I'll tell you," replied Ned. "As you are already aware, my father came West many years ago, with the hope of bettering his fortunes, as so many had done before him. He came to the Big Horn Valley. From time to time he sent home particulars of his struggles, but, suddenly, all communication ceased, and from that day to this no further news has been had of him. It was this strange silence, and what it signified, that, more than anything else, undermined the health of my mother, and prepared the way for the disease which resulted in her death. These facts duly realized, Bob, you will not be surprised to hear that one of my objects in coming here, on our present business, was the hope—a wild one, perhaps—of being able to solve the mystery of my father's fate."

"Ah, I comprehend a number of things now which have puzzled me," returned Bob. "Your hope may be a wild one, but many stranger mysteries than that of your father's fate have been solved. You know where he went and what he did during his stay hereabouts, and it seems quite reasonable to think that we may soon find the necessary clue to lead us to a complete solution of the problem."

He was silent a few minutes, as the couple jogged quietly onward, but the expression of his countenance attested that his thoughts were strangely busy.

"Oh, if it might be so, Ned!" he at length ejaculated, as a glow of enthusiasm and tender yearning appeared on his features. "If it might be in our power to put an end to the long pain and unrest which the unknown fate of Mr. Wharton has caused your sister! How strange it would be if we should discover that your father still lives!"

"Alas! that is something that we cannot hope for," returned Ned Wharton, his whole frame trembling with the wild agitation produced by Bob's suggestion. "If he were living, we should have heard from him! That was what mother said to herself every day and hour for years."

"And yet I can conceive of circumstances

where he might still be living without being heard from," declared Bob. "I need not speak of them now, as we really have no foundation, up to the present hour, for such an extreme hope, and it is better not to let our thoughts soar too far away from the actual facts within our knowledge. All that need be said, just now, is that we will give our most earnest attention to this weighty problem and make every effort to learn Mr. Wharton's fate."

Notwithstanding these very proper and reasonable views of the problem in question, it was easy to see by the thoughtful faces of the two friends that they were more hopefully drawn to it than they would have cared to admit.

This was especially the case with Bob Carpenter, and we may as well frankly state the reason for it.

He was in love with Ned's sister.

It was only natural, therefore, that he should dwell with tender delight upon the hope—as wild as it confessedly was—of restoring the lost father to the idol of his dreams.

For a long time the young explorers rode on in silence, nothing occurring to withdraw their thoughts from the fascinating subject which had so fully taken possession of their minds.

At least a dozen miles intervened between them and the abode of the Harewoods, when a trifling incident suddenly obtruded itself upon their attention and led up to discoveries of the greatest importance.

This incident was simply the flight across their path of a rabbit which had been startled from its covert by their approach, or by the movements of the active and irrepressible Demon in the adjacent bushes.

Of course the dog saw the rabbit, and in another instant was flying swiftly in pursuit of it.

Both soon vanished from view amid the underbrush of a ridge running nearly at right angles with the road, but the swift crash of the heavy dog through the obstructions in his path was quite enough to enlighten the young explorers in regard to the direction he was taking.

Naturally enough, they drew rein to see what would come of the matter.

The sound of Demon's impetuous movements soon died out on their hearing, but it was followed by a strange, startled barking.

"He wouldn't do that for a rabbit," declared Bob, swinging himself lightly from the saddle, after listening a moment. "He has made some discovery of which he wishes us to take notice!"

"Not red-skins, I hope," returned Ned, as the barking continued.

"No, it's nothing dangerous," explained Bob. "Let's hitch our horses as near to the scene as possible, and see what he has found. A few moments of rest," he added, as he felt the flank of his horse, "will do them good."

Assenting to this proposition, Ned followed him in the direction taken by Demon, whose barking had now ceased, as if he were conscious that his master was coming, or as if he were making explorations upon his own account.

By the time the boys had reached the foot of the ledge and hitched their horses, Demon slipped out of the bushes to note progress and invite them forward, his every look and action testifying that he desired their instant attention to his discoveries.

Following the dog's lead, the couple soon reached the mouth of a cave, into which Demon plunged for the second or third time, vanishing from view.

The entrance was so barricaded by washed earth, and so overgrown with bushes, that it would hardly have been remarked under any other circumstances than those which had actually attended its discovery.

A bark from within was interpreted by Bob as an invitation to enter—an order, in fact, to come and see what Demon had discovered.

"It's hardly a bear—hardly anything dangerous," he said, as he lighted the end of a coiled tallow torch with which he was always provided. "We can squeeze in, I think, without much trouble. Let me take the lead, and I can then light you in."

"Your tallow torch is all well enough for a sly search, Bob, but I'd rather have Old Putnam's guard; so here goes for a regular blaze!" and Ned at once proceeded to form a torch from the pines standing thickly around.

Using his big knife deftly he soon had a long "twist" of pine stems and branches ready to light if the occasion demanded.

"Now go ahead, Bob, and if bear or wolf is in this crib we'll shove a big blaze in his face," said Ned.

The two pards at once worked their way in at the narrow entrance, traversing a long, low passage, which at times almost forced them to creep, but which eventually widened and lightened into a considerable cavern or recess.

As Bob drew himself erect, flashing the light of his little torch around, a cry of surprise and interest escaped him.

"Quick, Ned!" he called; "light your torch!" which Ned promptly did and so flooded the gallery with light.

"There is what he wanted us to see," exclaimed Bob, pointing to the object which De-

mon was now regarding fixedly. "There! near the wall of the cave!"

Ned uttered a startled exclamation as he stepped forward.

What he saw was the skeleton of a man!

The ghastly object was still partly enveloped in shreds and fragments of moldering garments, and was evidently entire, although the skull was detached from the trunk.

Evidently it had lain there undisturbed for years.

Not far away was a mail-bag, near which lay a rifle.

The mail-bag was still locked, but there were numerous holes in it, where the leather had decayed, and through the largest of these rents were visible packages of letters.

Affixed to the barrel of the rifle was a slip of weather-stained paper, which bore the following words in pencil, in an almost illegible hand:

"Pursued by Indians. Killed several. Mortally wounded. Hope they will not find me here. Mail safe. Tell wife and friends. PETE DARRELL."

That was all!

But it was enough!

The two friends comprehended the fate of brave Peter Darrell as well as if they had been with him on the day of his last terrible ride, with a pack of howling red-skins hot upon his trail!

He had fought them as long as he could, and then given them the slip, still clinging to his precious mail, and had crawled into this cave, to yield up his breath in its solitudes, after tracing with enfeebled hand the few explanatory words which had thus strangely come to light!

"Poor fellow!" sighed Ned. "Perhaps some of these letters are still legible! Perhaps they can even be delivered, after all these years of delay! Let's look them over!"

Bob held the big torch aloft, while Ned proceeded to untie one of the packages of letters, and pass them in review.

"As I expected!" he soon ejaculated. "The most of these addresses can still be made out! The bulk of these letters can be forwarded to their destinations! We will take them, bag and all, to the nearest post-office. 'Mrs. Hester Thompson, Washington.' 'Rev. Cyrus Cooper, Onondaga, New York.' Oh, Bob! Bob!"

Language fails to describe the tone of voice in which Ned Wharton uttered this wild cry of amazement.

"Yes, Ned! What is it?"

For a moment Ned could not answer, standing and staring as if paralyzed.

"Oh, Bob! See! See!" he then cried, as his trembling fingers clutched the letter which had last fallen under his gaze, as he slipped them off from the package one after the other. "A letter in my father's handwriting! A letter addressed to my mother!"

Ned excitedly tore open this strange message of other days, and read as follows:

"SPRING VALLEY, Sept. 7, 1869.

"MY DEAR WIFE:—

"I hasten to add a few lines to my letter of Thursday last. The claim about which I wrote you at such length has not panned out worth a cent, and I have decided to go to Colorado, via Laramie. A fellow-miner, named Harrold Dabshaw, will accompany me. Am as well as ever and as hopeful, notwithstanding all these disappointments. Will write you in a day or two, after we have fairly started and have fully decided as to our route. Kiss Ned and Lizzie tenderly for me, and tell them that they are always in papa's thoughts. Hoping that you have received all my remittances and are in good health, I close, with a thousand loving caresses.

"Your faithful and devoted husband,

"ROGER WHARTON."

Such was the letter which had come into Ned's hands so strangely nearly ten years after it was written!

With what emotions he read it, pressing it again and again to his lips!

What tears he shed over it, especially at the reference to his sister and himself!

It was not until Bob had read it aloud to him, and he had read it a second and a third time for himself, that he could take in all its meanings and suggestions.

The excited comments which succeeded its perusal can be readily imagined by the reader.

A few minutes only had passed when Ned Wharton emerged from the cave, with a pale and agitated countenance, but in those few minutes he seemed to have lived years, becoming a serious, strong-hearted and thoughtful man!

His eyes, red with a prolonged flood of tears, had a keen, tender light in their depths, as if all the earnest and reverent tenderness of his nature had been called into play for the holy mission to which his life was henceforth to be devoted!

"Yes, the mystery which has so long enveloped father's fate shall be cleared up," he declared, as he led the way toward the horses, carrying the letters and mail-bag, while Bob handled tenderly the rusty and useless rifle with which Peter Darrell had sold his life so dearly. "He was about to go to Colorado, via Laramie."

He was to be accompanied by a fellow-miner named *Harrold Dabshaw*. Mark the name well, Bob! That *Harrold Dabshaw* must be found. As you will readily see, a whole series of possibilities surge up into view from the pages of my father's letter. He may have been killed by this same *Dabshaw*, or both he and *Dabshaw* may have been killed by the Indians. I need not pursue these theories further just now. In fact, my thoughts are all in a whirl. I want time to think. Let's dismiss the whole matter for the present, and give our attention to something else."

The couple lost no time in mounting and taking their way back to the river-road, where they proceeded to consult a choice manuscript map of the Big Horn region, which had evidently been prepared especially for their guidance.

"The nearest post-office is a pretentious little place called Big Horn City," said Ned, after careful consultation of the map. "It is about twenty miles from here, as the crow flies. I had not thought of going there to-day, but perhaps we had better do so, as I am very anxious to get rid of these letters. Perhaps there are other letters in the collection which will make other hearts as happy as father's has made mine."

Resuming their journey, the young heroes rode on a long time in the thoughtful silence resulting so naturally from their singular discoveries.

A low, menacing growl from *Demon* suddenly broke in upon their musings at a moment when they had just permitted their horses to drop into a walk.

Looking around, they saw that the faithful mastiff was attentive to something that was transpiring at no great distance behind them.

"What can it be?" queried Ned, drawing rein and listening.

The dog's warning growl was repeated, but louder than before, and the hair along his spine began to take the appearance of bristles.

The clatter of hoofs suddenly resounded.

"Our old acquaintances—the Crows!" exclaimed Ned. "We must ride for our lives!"

The clatter in question was indeed ominous.

It announced a considerable body of horsemen, at least half a dozen.

In another instant, the young men were going with the speed of a tempest, the dog following, as was his wont, but with a strange hesitancy of manner, as well as with a singular fixity of gaze in the direction he was going.

The secret of his conduct was soon apparent.

The horsemen had barely got down to their best work, when a warning bark, that was almost human in its intonations, escaped the dog, and he half-wheeled to the left, striking into a buffalo-trail which skirted a small tributary of the river.

Almost mechanically, the two riders imitated the example thus set them, but not without recognizing the absolute necessity of the movement.

Even as they took their new direction, they saw that a number of red-skins were dashing at full gallop toward them from the direction in which they had been going.

In other terms, they had been nearly caught between two converging bodies of Indians.

Of course nothing was left for them except to pull out of their trouble by the route *Demon* had so promptly taken.

What a ride was that which followed!

Fortunately the boys had secured nearly a hundred rods the start, and their horses were still in excellent condition.

"Besides, we shall draw a line in due time," exclaimed Ned, his lips coming together with ominous energy and decision.

He began looking keenly for a good point to make a stand, and it came even sooner than he expected—a narrow pass between two rocky and wooded bluffs—just what he desired.

To dismount and post themselves behind convenient shelter, with their bridles over their arms, was the work of a few moments.

Just beyond the pass was a cross-ridge of sufficient height to readily mask a fugitive's flight.

"Give it to them as hot as possible, as they approach," enjoined Ned. "You take those to the right and I will call for those to the left. We can empty at least half their saddles."

On came the pursuers, yelling like demons, in their usual fashion, and with a vim which showed that they did not suspect our heroes of daring to make a stand against such overpowering numbers.

"Wait till you can see the whites of their eyes, Bob," added Ned, in a guarded tone, "and then give 'em particular thunder."

A few moments more sufficed to bring the foremost red-skins into the desired prominence, and then the repeaters of the boys began getting in their deadly work.

Three or four saddles were emptied in bewildering succession, and the loud, joyous yells of the pursuers were suddenly changed to cries of pain and consternation.

Another moment, and even the most furious of the pursuers had reined his horse back on his haunches, and was retreating even more rapidly than he had advanced.

"Now's the time to distance them," cried Ned, leaping into the saddle. "We can secure a good start before they will rally."

Away they flew again, still ascending the lateral ravine which had afforded them such timely outlet from the main valley.

On and on, until miles had been left behind them, and they had reached a lone, rugged wilderness of rock, wood, and water, which the foot of no white man, in all human probability, had ever invaded.

"There! I reckon we can breathe in peace now," muttered Ned, with stern jubilation, as he drew rein again and leaped to the ground. "Let's test the question."

Bob imitated his example, and both scanned their trail and listened.

The result was all they desired.

Nothing was heard or seen of their savage foes.

The terrible lesson they had received was evidently all they needed.

"We're rid of them once more, it seems," observed Ned. "Two or three more such experiences, and they'll begin to get discouraged, beyond doubt!"

He gave a look to his surroundings, surveying the lofty peaks, the magnificent trees, the murmuring waters and dark ravines, with an ever-growing admiration and pleasure.

"What a glorious spot!" he exclaimed, passing with the ease of an old plainsman from his late keen sense of personal peril to the recognition of nature's beauties and grandeurs. "What a radiant solitude! With a few good friends, with one fair girl, in such a scene as this, how easy to turn your back on the great warring, wicked world, and live as free as mountain eagles!"

"I agree with you, Ned," returned Bob. "We must have a snug nest in some such spot as this, sooner or later!"

"In the mean time, let's see if we can make our way back to civilization," proposed Ned, producing his map again. "I'm afraid it will be no easy matter, as the sun seems to have deserted us—at least temporarily—and there is so much ore in all these hills that our pocket compasses are of no value whatever."

"Nevertheless, we can try."

The map was duly studied, a course decided upon, and the couple resumed progress, leading their horses, which they had decided to spare for a few miles, that they might themselves rest from the fatigues they had experienced in the saddle. As usual, *Demon* stalked after them, calm and stately of mien, and as silent as a shadow.

CHAPTER IV.

A MAN OF MYSTERY.

THE slanting rays of the afternoon sun fell upon really a magnificent dwelling, which stood upon a commanding elevation in one of the loveliest, if also one of the loneliest, valleys of the Big Horn region.

As could have been seen at a glance, a fortune must have been requisite for the erection of such a stately residence in such a place remote from civilization, for it must have been necessary to bring all the workmen and a good share of the materials from a long distance.

Indeed, this apparently elegant abode seemed almost out of place in the midst of its surroundings, so few were the traces of cultivation or refinement in the adjacent grounds and clearings.

There was a mine at no great distance, but no miners. Not that it was deserted, but simply that the owner was never quite ready to commence business; there was always something wanting.

If the mine had been cleared of water, there was sure to be a dearth of important wheels, shafts, or cordage; or if there happened to be a furnace in running order, there was certain to be no fuel upon the spot to run it.

The excuses of this sort which had been given out from year to year would have filled a volume.

A high stone fence, with massive gates, had been built around the entrance of the mine and its various buildings; but the gates were never seen to open or close; and very few indeed were the persons who could say that they had ever caught a glimpse of the interiors of the yards or the buildings.

There were very few trails in the neighborhood of either the house or the mine, and no road worthy of the name within a day's journey.

As a natural and inevitable correlation of these circumstances, the proprietor of these handsome properties had no neighbors whatever.

As to friends and relatives, these names had never been coupled with him.

No visitor, not even a passing traveler, was ever seen to ascend the spacious steps of the grand and solitary dwelling.

There were great dogs at both the house and the mine, which were heard to bark incessantly at times, night after night, and which had even been seen running at large occasionally in the vicinity, but no one pretended to say just how

harmless or dangerous they were, as no one could boast of ever having encountered them.

Who and what could be the man living there in such gilded desolation?

As often as this question had been asked, it had never been answered. About all that was known of him was that he called himself *Dabshaw—Harrold Dabshaw*.

Strange tales had been told concerning him; strange theories suggested. Some thought that he was identical with a famous counterfeiter, who had made his escape from a prison in one of the Atlantic States, after passing nearly a million of bogus money; others said that he was simply a murderer of the vulgarest sort who had made good his escape from the theater of his crime.

Still others suggested that he was a scion of one of the wealthiest families of America who had been banished to these far solitudes as the only way of saving him from the consequences of some horrible cruelty and wickedness.

Ignorant of these reports, or caring nothing for them if he heard them; offering no explanations and asking no questions; *Harrold Dabshaw* came and went, at all hours of the day and night, now afoot, and now on a fleet horse, nobody knew whence or why; an incarnate puzzle, a man of mystery.

In a spacious sitting room of the *Dabshaw* house, on the afternoon in question, sat two ladies who evidently were mother and daughter.

The latter was a gloriously beautiful girl of some seventeen summers, with a slight but hardy frame, and with a gifted, aspiring soul, which was everywhere displayed upon her features and announced in her every thought and action.

No purer, sweeter girl than *Olla Dorsett*!

Mrs. *Dorsett* presented, or at least suggested, the same general type of beauty as her daughter, but she had suffered in body and mind, and was rapidly becoming an invalid whom no physician would have cared to have for a patient.

The mother reclined upon a cosey lounge, while *Olla* sat at her head, with a book in her lap, from which she had been reading.

"I wish you felt well enough to get out into the radiant sunshine and fresh air," said *Olla*, caressing the luxuriant tresses of her mother, which were becoming prematurely gray. "I am sure a short walk or ride would revive you."

"I do not feel strong enough to walk or ride, darling," replied Mrs. *Dorsett*, drawing her breath as painfully as slowly. "You have no idea how weak I am. It would cost me a positive effort to raise my hand to my head."

"So much the more reason for a change. Mr. *Dabshaw* has said again and again that I am quite at liberty to make use at all times of one of his horses."

The mother shook her head.

"I could not bear the fatigue of riding over these rough trails," she declared. "Besides—"

The sufferer sighed profoundly, leaving her thought unspoken.

"Besides what, mother?" suggested *Olla*.

"I wish to avoid, as much as possible everything which brings us into contact with Mr. *Dabshaw*!"

"True, dear mamma! But between my regard for your health and my dislike and fear of Mr. *Dabshaw* I cannot hesitate a moment. I could face a tiger for your sake!"

"You are a good, brave girl, *Olla*," returned the mother, caressing her fondly. "and for this reason I have at last decided to talk to you seriously about our situation."

"If you will not go out, mamma, why not let me cook you something nice? I noticed you did not eat a mouthful of dinner."

"It would be a mere waste of time to prepare anything for me, *Olla*. I have no appetite. The truth is, my child—"

A convulsion of pain passed over her frame, rendering it impossible for her, during several minutes, to proceed with her observations.

"The truth is," she then finished, "I am too worried, in a number of ways, to give the least attention to the choicest delicacy you could bring me. You know how rapidly my health has been falling during the last three or four months?"

"Only too well, mamma!"

And tears appeared in the maiden's radiant eyes.

"Does this change seem to you natural? If you remember how strong and hearty I have always been, will it not seem singular that I am literally sinking into my grave?"

"The change is indeed surprising," returned *Olla*. "But it seems to me to be the effect of your worry about father."

"No, that is not what ails me. I have ceased to hope to ever see your father again. It is now more than a year since he invited us to come out to the Big Horn region to join him, more than a year since he failed to keep his appointment to meet us at the nearest railway station on our arrival; more than a year since he vanished from all human ken as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him!"

Her head sunk back on her pillow and her

white face became convulsed with pain, while her form quivered with excitement.

"Do not despair of seeing him again, mother," returned Olla. "Of course some very serious calamity has overtaken him, or he would not have failed to meet us on our arrival. But I can imagine a thousand things to keep him from us, and still leave him in possession of his life, if not of his liberty."

"No, darling," murmured Mrs. Dorsett. "I fear the worst! You will remember that your father's last letter spoke of some wonderful gold-mines he had discovered far, far in the depths of the Big Horn Mountains, where no human being had ever been until he chanced that way, and I am persuaded that he lost his life in those solitudes. Perhaps he lost his way and perished of cold and hunger; perhaps the gold he had secured tempted some evil-minded associate to kill him. He may have even been murdered for his secret. He spoke of a spot where the beds of the river were full of gold which had been precipitated from the quartz-ledge above. Such secrets as these, Olla, are dangerous possessions to a lone man in these wild solitudes, and it is only reasonable, under the circumstances, to fear that they have proved fatal to your father."

Olla was silent, but not convinced. It was as easy and natural for her to hope as it was for her mother to despair. The difference in their views was simply an outcome of the difference between them in years and experiences, in health and strength.

"But the fate of your father is not all that worries me, Olla," resumed Mrs. Dorsett, after a pause. "I am anxious about you, about your future, about your present dangers and privations!"

She bent a keen glance around, as if apprehensive of an eavesdropper, and then resumed, lowering her voice to a whisper:

"After we had spent days and weeks in the vain search for your father, thus exhausting the money we brought with us, we chanced to encounter Mr. Dabshaw, who offered me a position as housekeeper, and said that you could of course have a home with me. I thought at first that we were indebted to Mr. Dabshaw's kindness of heart for this offer, and gladly accepted it, not with the intention of long remaining a housekeeper, but with a view to having a home here until we could solve the terrible mystery of your father's silence."

"Well, mamma," breathed Olla, not taking her eyes from the pale features before her.

"Well, darling, we know now what were Mr. Dabshaw's real motives. He wanted to get you into his power: to have you at his mercy! He seems to have been seized with a mad passion for you the moment his eyes rested upon you. I had no suspicion at that time of the real state of the case, but my eyes have since been terribly opened. The moment I realized the sentiments of Mr. Dabshaw toward you, that moment I sought to protect you from his threatening and distasteful attentions. Finding that I was in the way, and that fair means were not likely to advance his suit, he turned his attention to poisoning me, that you might be left without a protector."

"All true, mamma," returned Olla, a glow of keen resolution appearing upon her sunny face, "but even these afflictions need not drive us to despair. We know now that Mr. Dabshaw has given you poison, but we can take good care that he does not get a chance to give you any more. If I cannot always prevent him from intruding upon me, I can at least continue to signify how utterly unacceptable his attentions are to me. The worst he can do is to turn us out of the house, and even that would not cause me the least dismay at this season of the year. Should he dare to resort to violence, as you have so long feared he would, he will be promptly checked, you may be certain. We are not only in possession of arms, but we know how to use them."

Mrs. Dorsett did not immediately answer. She was lost in amazement to see how bravely Olla was meeting the various menaces in which her life and happiness were enveloped.

"In regard to our future, mamma," continued the brave, sensible girl, "I think we may safely leave its trials and perils to be taken care of as they come. Mr. Dabshaw is angry with me for rejecting his offer of marriage, with such unvarying persistency, and he is angry with you because you will not exercise your authority and force me to marry him. He is even threatening and dangerous. But all this need not crush us. All the men in the world are not Dabshaws; to the contrary, the Dabshaws are the exception. The first man who comes this way—and men do pass here at long intervals—is more likely to be a real man than a caricature, and in that case we shall throw ourselves upon his protection, and ask him to take us to a place of safety."

The mother was still silent. It seemed to her like a work of magic to see how all the shadows and dangers of the situation were dissolving and vanishing under the good sense and calm courage Olla was able to bring to their consideration.

"You see, therefore, darling mamma," con-

cluded the maiden, throwing her arms around Mrs. Dorsett and kissing her tenderly—"you see how little there is to worry about, after all! Nobody can expect to live in this world without a fair share of annoyances, privations and perils, but it is equally true that nobody need give up to them. We'll turn our backs on this place just as soon as a favorable opportunity of doing so is presented. Meanwhile, we have only to be on our guard against Mr. Dabshaw and his peculiar methods!"

"Olla! you give me new life and hope!" cried Mrs. Dorsett, as a tinge of color crept into her white cheeks. "Bring me my blue wrap and hat, and I will at least take a walk with you in the garden!"

Bursting into a joyous song, like a bird set free from its prison, Olla ran up-stairs, soon returning with the articles mentioned, in which she hastily equipped her mother, and in another moment they were taking their way out of the side-door.

They did not go unobserved.

A pair of dark, deadly eyes looked at them, from a niche afforded by the configuration of the walls of the side hall—the eyes of a man who had been a listener to their conversation.

"Fair means have failed, and so have my attempts at poisoning the old woman," muttered this personage, as he continued to look after the mother and daughter, with bloodless lips and ghoul-like eyes. "I must now proceed to the final act—to prompt, sharp measures! I can triumph only by violence—sure and sudden violence! This very night that girl shall be wholly in my power and at my mercy! This very night Mrs. Dorsett shall be out of my path forever."

The speaker was of course the proprietor of the lordly mansion—was Harrold Dabshaw—the very man Ned Wharton had placed upon the tablets of his memory under such significant circumstances—the very man Ned was so eager to encounter!

CHAPTER V.

A VILLAIN'S WOOING.

WHEN Mrs. Dorsett and her daughter returned from their walk in the garden, the former looked so much better that Olla could not help saying:

"You see that I was right, mamma, in getting you out of doors. An hour of sunshine and fresh air every day would soon make you a new woman."

"It is not the air entirely, Olla," returned Mrs. Dorsett, leading the way into the dining-room and seating herself in a chair, instead of dropping inertly upon a lounge, as had for several weeks been her wont. "It's because I've had such a good talk with you, and because you have given me so much hope and consolation."

Footsteps resounded in the hall, and Harrold Dabshaw made his appearance.

As his garb and aspect sufficiently attested, he was naturally a low-minded and conscienceless ruffian, with a thin assumption of gentility.

Not merely the elegant clothes he wore, but the very manner in which he wore them, proclaimed that he was out of place in them.

He was somewhat past his prime, and evidently not in the best of health, as if the hardships and privations of his early life had proved a poor foundation for the excesses and dissipations of his riper years.

He was thick-set and clumsy, with an uncertain gait, and had the appearance of being chronically ill at ease, whatever might be the situation in which he found himself.

His disposition being wholly mirthless, it was no wonder that his sour, gloomy face had become checkered with wrinkles.

Altogether, he was about as poorly equipped to sue for a young girl's love as any man who ever ventured into that business.

"I saw you come in," he said, taking a chair, "and was surprised to see how much better you are looking, both of you. Good news, perhaps!"

Naturally suspicious, his face was now an interrogation point.

"Not exactly," replied Mrs. Dorsett, "but good counsels. I have been having a pleasant chat with my daughter."

"I wish I could say as much," declared the strange recluse, arising and sauntering across the room. "But the more I love her, the more she seems to detest me. Is not that singular?"

"It is certainly suggestive," spoke Olla, quietly, with the evident intention of sparing her mother the fatigue of replying. "Any other man than Harrold Dabshaw would have doubtless taken to heart the meaning of this state of things a long time ago!"

"Perhaps so, but I did not choose to take it," returned Dabshaw, pausing and leaning on the back of a chair. "I prefer to hope."

A door was heard to open and close, and he looked out into the hall, receiving a couple of letters from the only servant in his employ—a low-browed, coarse-looking man, who seldom had occasion to enter the house or to say a word to the mother and daughter.

Hastily breaking the seal of one of the missives, as his factotum beat a retreat, Dabshaw

glanced swiftly over its contents, a look of surprise and annoyance mantling his features.

The situation was too tempting for Olla.

"Bad news, perhaps?" she queried, with a clever imitation of the mien with which the unwelcome suitor had so recently asked a similar question.

"Well, yes," replied Dabshaw, with a frankness that was evidently born of his annoyance. "The letter is from my son in Boston."

"Your son?" cried Olla. "I didn't know you had a son!"

"Oh, yes," and Dabshaw again seated himself. "He has not seen me since he was a mere lad. I've kept him at school and college."

"But there's nothing bad about that."

"No, but the fool has taken it into his head to come here to see me."

"Indeed! Then, why don't you resign all pretensions to my hand," cried Olla, with a merry laugh and the archest mien in the world, "and give this son of yours a chance? Is he handsome?"

"Well, yes—a veritable image of myself."

Mrs. Dorsett could not help joining a laugh to Olla's joyous merriment at this answer.

"Then why do you regard the news of his coming arrival as bad news, Mr. Dabshaw?" continued the brave-hearted girl.

"Because he's coming to a place which is only fit for wolves to live in," explained the mysterious recluse, as he sprang up abruptly and began walking to and fro. "Because—he isn't wanted here, that's the long and the short of it. It has been so long since I have seen him that we are comparatively strangers, and I prefer to remain so."

"I can understand your feelings," commented Olla, as she reflected how many dark crimes and secrets had accumulated upon Dabshaw's head since he saw the son in question.

"Of course this is no place for him," resumed Dabshaw, pausing at one of the windows of the dining-room and looking out. "He is used to gay society, all sorts of sports, yachts, horse-races, and whatever else is of interest to the young men of the present generation. I have supplied him liberally with money, representing myself to him as a 'cattle baron,' and have advised him again and again to marry an heiress."

"Speaking of marriage, Mr. Dabshaw, you did not answer my question," said Olla. "Why not free me from your attentions, and give me a recommendation to your son?"

As before, Dabshaw ignored the playful suggestion, but a flash of anger crept into his face.

"You see, therefore," he resumed, "that this is no place for my son. He'll die in disgust here in less than two weeks. What is there here to occupy a young scapegrace fresh from college?"

"Perhaps he'd like to hunt," suggested Olla demurely.

"Hunt? What is there to hunt?" cried Dabshaw, as he faced about and began striding to and fro. "There's no longer a single buffalo to every hundred thousand square miles. I've only seen one in five years, and he'd gone stone blind looking for a mate. I did see a young grizzly or two, a few years ago, away up in the mountains, but no one who is not a downright fool will ever hunt a grizzly. Think, too, of the privations of living in such a place as this. No papers, no news, no nothing. Why, Quipp has been four days going to the nearest post-office for these letters—two days to go, and two to come."

"A residence in a spot like this has its advantages, however," suggested Olla.

"How advantages?" and Dabshaw came to a halt, in astonishment.

"In this way," explained Olla. "If one is a fugitive from justice, an escaped murderer, a man with a price on his head, or anything in this line, it is a very nice thing to find himself so far from all contact with his fellows."

Dabshaw's face flushed scarlet.

"I think I understand you," he said, with sinister grimace. "But I had forgotten my other letter. Excuse me while I read it."

He opened the second letter, at the same time resuming his walk, and read it while moving to and fro, pausing two or three times, as if to note the statements of his correspondent more closely.

Gradually a look of content that was almost a smile appeared on his hard visage.

"This is better," he exclaimed, flattening the letter wide open, as he looked alternately from one to the other. "Perhaps I ought to wait for further advices before mentioning the matter, but it's really impossible for me to keep a secret, and—yes, I will be frank with you. This letter concerns you both very closely—very."

"How concerns us?" asked Olla.

"It refers to Gideon Dorsett, the missing husband and father."

The speaker's manner was so evidently sincere, that the mother and daughter could not doubt his assertion.

While Mrs. Dorsett grew ghastly pale, Olla flushed in eager excitement.

"It tells me," continued Dabshaw, again looking from one to the other, "that Mr. Dor-

sett still lives and is in good health. It even tells me where he is and what he is doing!"

"Oh, if this were so!" cried Olla, sinking into a chair.

Mrs. Dorsett clasped her hands together in mute entreaty, but could not speak.

"May we see the letter?" asked Olla.

"Under certain conditions—yes."

The girl understood him.

It was another outcrop of the wooing which had so long annoyed her.

"I've often had a suspicion that you were not a stranger to my husband's disappearance, Mr. Dabshaw," said the mother. "There are indeed a number of events and circumstances which point unmistakably in that direction."

"Really?"

"I will mention them, if you care to hear them."

"It's unnecessary," returned Dabshaw, as he seized a chair and drew it near the mother and daughter, seating himself in it. "In the hope of establishing better relations with you both, I will tell you just what the facts in the case are. To begin with, I *did* know something about Mr. Dorsett's disappearance, and I know where he is now!"

The statement was sufficiently comprehensive to be startling.

Mrs. Dorsett and Olla almost held their breath.

"Tell us all about him," pleaded the latter, not merely with her voice, but with glance, gesture and mien.

"If I do so, it's only to show you how entirely I am master of his fate, as of yours," declared Dabshaw, hitching his chair nearer, while his eyes suddenly glowed like fire. "You are aware, I believe, that Mr. Dorsett had made a wonderful discovery of gold—"

"He so wrote us," breathed Olla.

"To be candid, he was on his way to the nearest mint with two hundred pounds of gold in a bag across the withers of his horse when I first made his acquaintance. I not only took him prisoner, and robbed him of the gold in question, but I also took the liberty of asking him to tell me where he found it, and of telling him that he must remain a prisoner until he consented to answer!"

The mother and daughter drew long sighs of relief.

It was something to know—as they *did* know from the truthfulness of their persecutor's manner—that the husband and father was still living.

CHAPTER VI.

A VILLAIN'S CONFESSION.

"But what did you want of the gold, Mr. Dabshaw?" asked Olla, with a wave of her hand over the luxuries around her.

"Want of it? what does anybody want of money? I came here with a considerable fortune which had been willed me by a relative, but I was fool enough to sink the most of it in this great mansion and in land speculations which have turned out badly. I was really distressed for money at the moment I discovered your father's secret, Olla, and it is only because I have helped myself from the pockets of others that I have been able to support my son and myself until now."

"Why, it has been reported," remarked Mrs. Dorsett, "that there are bushels and bushels of nuggets in your mine. When you want money, you have only to take a basket and descend to the bottom of your mine, where you can readily fill it with all the gold you require."

"Chatter, Mrs. Dorsett—merely the chatter of fools!" declared Dabshaw, with a savage emphasis which went far to prove his sincerity. "I am really a poor man, and have no more idea where gold can be found in paying quantities than has that man in my stable!"

"And so you robbed my father?"

"And so I robbed your father and demanded that he should share his secret with me," avowed Dabshaw, as frankly as unblushingly. "I represented to him that the gold was no more designed for him than for me, and that the mere fact of his stumbling upon it first could give him no right and title to it to the prejudice of mine!"

"Well, sir?" queried Olla.

"Well, my dear girl, your father did not see the matter in the same light as I did, and I could not bring him to reason. He did indeed say that he would make me a present of the gold I had seized, if I would restore him to liberty unconditionally, but that was merely a half-measure which I could not accept. I knew he had found some rich placer where gold can be had by simply filling a basket with it, in the style you have suggested, and I wanted to emancipate myself, at once and forever, from the financial cares which had begun to weigh so heavily upon me."

"I suppose there never lived a pirate or brigand who could not give the same good reasons," declared Olla, as scornfully as boldly. "But go on!"

"Go on! There's little more to say. Your father having definitely refused to respond to my wishes in any shape or manner, I had no other alternative than to shut him up in an

underground dungeon from which there is not the remotest likelihood that he will ever escape!"

"Poor papa! And such is his situation at this moment, and for such reasons!"

"Exactly!"

Mrs. Dorsett burst into tears, weeping so violently as to seem in danger of going into convulsions.

But such was not the case with Olla.

She was too angry for a single tear to be forthcoming.

"Of course it would be useless to ask you just where he is?" she queried.

"Perfectly useless!"

"And equally in vain to ask you to take us to see him?"

"You are right!"

"Or to release him unconditionally?"

"You might as well ask the moon and sun to stop in their orbits, my dear Miss Dorsett!"

"Then how is he to be released and restored to us?"

"Ah! now you begin to *talk*! as I hoped and expected you would!" declared Dabshaw, thrusting his letters into his pocket and resuming his excited walk. "You alone can save him!"

"I? How?"

"By becoming my wife!"

Olla recoiled in horror.

"Give me a solemn promise to become my wife any day I shall name, or within a month," continued Dabshaw, his face glowing redly, "and I will have your father here within forty-eight hours!"

The girl sat as if paralyzed.

"You see how easy it is," he added, pausing near her. "Merely a promise!"

Still she was silent.

"Of course I do not pretend to be the *beau ideal* of a young girl's heart," he pursued, hovering above her, his long arms tossing, his whole frame tremulous with eagerness. "You can find all that in my successor—long after I am dead! To-day you can marry for love of your father—to save him from dying like a dog in a rock-bound dungeon—to restore him to your mother, whose whole soul yearns for him and cries out for him so wildly! To-day you can marry as the sacred duty of a daughter who loves her father and who would save him from a living death!"

The girl wrung her hands in speechless anguish, stealing a glance at her mother.

"In a word, you will sacrifice yourself for your father," finished Dabshaw. "You will not be unmindful of his sufferings! You will marry me that he may live! You will forgive me all there is wrong in my conduct, past or present, in view of the wild fervor of my affection for you, and no mere selfishness of your own preferences and wishes will be allowed to stand a moment between you and the accomplishment of your holy mission! Consent, therefore, consent! Once more and forever, consent!"

"Never!"

The word came from the white lips of Olla Dorsett as if impelled by intense anger and scorn.

"What! You dare to refuse—you will live only for yourself—you will leave your father to perish in his terrible captivity! Did I hear aright? You will not consent to marry me?"

"Never, I say!" and Olla sprung to her feet with the impetuosity of a tigress, sweeping him backward to the floor with a single swift movement of her arm. "Monster! how dare you presume for a single moment that you will be permitted to succeed in this infamous scheme you have concocted?"

"You will leave him to die, then?" cried Dabshaw, gathering himself up from the floor.

"No! I will save him, even as I will yet punish you! Go! Leave us! The very air is polluted by your presence!"

"Very well, miss! I will leave you for the present," cried Dabshaw, his face white with rage and surprise, and his eyes gleaming like a wolf's. "But I will not give you up! I will not take no for an answer. I give you until supper-time to think the matter over and to take counsel of the helpless and broken condition of your mother. I am sure you will decide in my favor when you have given the subject due attention. You will not only crown my wishes and aspirations, but you will save your father and yourselves!"

He had gained the door while speaking, and in another moment he had dashed out into the hall and made his way to the rear entrance and out of the house, closing the doors behind him.

"The monster!" cried Olla, radiant with daring, energy, and devotion. "He would not have told us of his possible crimes if he had not believed—yes, *believed*—that I would accept him to save father."

"Of course you could not do otherwise than reject him," consoled Mrs. Dorsett. "The robber and oppressor of your father! the attempted poisoner of your mother! What astonishing effrontery! But he is in an awful rage. What will he do? May he not kill us? May he not starve your father?"

"No, mamma. He will do none of these things," answered Olla, with the holy light of devotion in her eyes. "Long enough have we endured his persecutions. Forbearance has ceased to be a virtue. Now that we know that father is alive—for we *do* know it—and possibly within a score of miles of us, we must not remain idle a day longer! We must be up and doing. We must leave this house immediately—appeal to every true man we encounter—stir up assistance—proclaim the situation!"

She was talking in this same strain, half an hour later, after ministering to Mrs. Dorsett, when, on looking from one of the front windows, she uttered a cry of surprise and joy.

"Oh, mother!" she cried. "Relief has come sooner than expected! Yonder comes an old man with a horse and wagon—the first I have seen in many a month! Get ready for a ride as soon as you can, while I run out and stop this stranger and appeal to him for assistance!"

She seized her hat and shawl and bounded out of the house.

By the time she returned Mrs. Dorsett had gathered a little bundle of necessities and was ready for flight.

"It is as I hoped," whispered Olla, with nervous glances around. "The stranger is a very, very old man, as you can see by his white beard, but he seems as stout of body as of mind, and has promised to protect us with his life. He says he will take us to any place we may desire to reach, and even join us in our search for father."

"Did he mention his name?"

"I was too excited to ask for it."

"Or say where he is from?"

"No, mamma—"

"Or whither he was going?"

"It was not necessary, since he has placed himself at our disposal."

"It's odd he should come along at just this moment," said Mrs. Dorsett. "I suppose it's all right—"

"Of course it is. Besides, we need not go with him if you find that there is anything wrong about him. Come."

Mrs. Dorsett did not hesitate.

She was quite as anxious as her daughter, not merely to get out of Dabshaw's clutches, but to enter upon the search for her husband.

On nearing the strange vehicle, Mrs. Dorsett was so favorably impressed by its driver, who wore a sort of uniform, and whose white hair and beard almost seemed in themselves a guarantee of respectability, that she did not hesitate to trust herself and Olla with him, contenting herself with asking a question or two, as he helped them to take their places, and then took the seat in front of them.

The horse seemed a little fresh and fiery, for such a road as was open to him, and it was not long before the ladies began to regret that they had placed themselves behind him.

"Will he not be difficult to manage?" ventured Olla, as the wagon approached a great precipice with which she was familiar. "Will he not run away with us?"

"It looks like it," was the answer, as the stranger gave the animal its head, allowing it to spring into a gallop.

"Oh, we shall be killed!" cried Mrs. Dorsett, as the wagon began to bound and jolt violently under her.

"Can't you hold him, sir?" demanded Olla excitedly, beginning to share her mother's alarm.

"Well, I could, if I set about it," answered the driver, in an altered tone. "But I don't wish to stop him."

"Not wish—heavens! We're going straight to the precipice!" gasped Mrs. Dorsett.

"Yes! that's where you're going," responded the driver, turning his wicked and murderous eyes upon her. "*I've got you!*"

They knew him now—both mother and daughter.

He had spoken in his natural voice.

He had shown them the awful gleam of his baleful eyes.

He was simply Harrold Dabshaw.

His extraordinary disguise had been assumed for a terrible purpose.

"Yes, I've got you," the brute repeated as, he plied his whip, and uttered a yell worth of a Comanche. "The old woman is going over the precipice with the horse and wagon. But you, Olla—I shall save you and myself, with the aid of that lower limb of the oak directly in our path. *Ha, ha!*"

And again he plied the whip, while another wild yell awoke the echoes of the adjacent hills and forests.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GOLD STREAM.

THE walk of Ned Wharton and Bob Carpenter through the great wilderness in which we left them was continued quite a while without producing any sense of weariness, so thoroughly did they appreciate and admire the rustic loveliness and undefiled grandeur of their surroundings.

Everything they saw, peak, river, or wood, seemed as fresh as it came from the hands of nature.

No sign of a human presence met their eyes—no sound of human industry, not even the report of a hunter's rifle.

Not the least trace of a human trail was encountered—only the tracks which had been worn and followed by countless myriads of wild animals during the long ages of prehistoric existence.

The conversation of the two friends was rather more interrupted than usual, for the reason that both were very busy with their thoughts.

Bob was thinking of "the girl he had left behind him"—of Ned's sister, Lizzie Wharton—and wondering if she would really carry out the threat, promise, or suggestion, whatever we may call it, she had made in her latest letter, to surprise them both at an early date by her presence in the Big Horn Valley.

This was in response to an announcement they had made to her from Helena of their expected visit to that region.

As to Ned, he read again and again the letter from his father, Roger Wharton, which had come into his hands so strangely after such a long interval of writing, and asked himself when and where he should meet the Harrold Dabshaw who had accompanied the missing miner upon his last journey, or if he would ever meet him.

It was certainly a rare stroke of good fortune that Ned had secured the letter in question and the consequent clue it afforded, and he already ventured to hope, with the natural enthusiasm of his years, that he would make the acquaintance of Dabshaw before leaving the valley, if he were still in existence.

The young adventurers at length halted to rest and take a bite of lunch from the supplies with which they were provided, and then they mounted anew, rifles in hand, and resumed their attempt to make their way back to the river-road, from which the red-skins had driven them.

As usual, Demon stalked gravely at their heels with an occasional excursion into the adjacent thickets.

Ere long they came to the brow of a cliff from which they looked down into a slough as black as ink, which appeared like a magnified alkali sink, it being at least a hundred rods in diameter, without visible outlet.

This strange pool displayed no other vegetation than a few patches of bushes and an occasional bog of long, coarse grass.

The young fellows were as puzzled as interested, the more especially as there came a strong odor from the pool of decaying chemicals.

"I never saw anything like this before," decided Ned, as he halted to survey the pool. "It reminds me of some of those geyser reservoirs we saw in the Yellowstone Park, only here there is no outlet, and the pool is evidently stagnant. We are probably the first white men who have ever gazed upon this scene. For the want of a better name we'll call the place Alkali Sink, and insert it under this name on our map."

It being readily seen that it would be impossible to cross this pool, the boys changed their course sufficiently to pass around it.

They had not gone far before they came to a sight which startled them—the skeleton of a horse and man blending in one mass in a small pool beside the big one and directly in their pathway.

The horse had evidently walked into the pool, sinking to the breast, and the horseman had dismounted, stepping into the treacherous, glutinous compound, both sticking inextricably therein and floundering lower and lower with every movement, until death had come to free them from their horrible tortures.

Ned paused to survey the spectacle attentively, recalling the discoveries he had made that day, and asking himself if the horseman might not have been his missing father.

As if to add to his anxieties, a spade and other articles of a mining outfit were visible in the midst of the bones.

He discussed the matter with Bob, who repudiated *in toto* the suggestion that the skeleton might be that of Mr. Wharton.

"You're getting nervous, Ned," he declared, with a smile. "You mustn't think all such ghastly finds belong to your father! It is doubtful if Mr. Wharton, on his way to Colorado, passed within a hundred miles of this spot! A more likely explanation than that is at our service. The victim may have been a simple prospector, who had got lost and wandered far out of his way, or he may have plunged knowingly into these solitudes to visit some river or mountain of gold he had discovered and was keeping secret."

As nothing better than these suggestions could be offered, the companions contented themselves with them, and resumed progress, passing around the small pool and continuing to skirt the larger one.

"Is not that a smoke?" asked Ned, abruptly, looking ahead, to a point where a small stream of water came trickling down a considerable declivity into one side of the pool. "Can any human being haunt such a spot as that?"

"Well, our experience would seem to prove that human beings may be looked for almost everywhere," replied Bob, smilingly. "Nevertheless, what we see is doubtless a sort of chemical combustion, like the slacking of lime, or like the rotting of peat or wood in alkali."

The latter theory was accepted, as the "smoke" ceased to be perceptible on coming nearer to it, but the mere suggestion of a human presence in the vicinity was enough to make the young explorers wary.

They continued to look sharply around them, keeping their rifles in readiness for action, and they did not in the least relax their vigilance as they left the Alkali Sink, and began ascending the slope of the hills adjacent.

They were mindful of their recent escapes from the red-skins, and realized that constant vigilance was a duty.

Ten to one this is a gold-bearing region," surmised Bob, with keen glances around. "That outcrop of rock yonder is a promising quartz. The stream which comes down the hill from yonder mountain must be at times an awful torrent, to judge by the holes it has washed out of its banks and the depth of its bed."

This view was confirmed as the horsemen rode nearer and at length halted.

The brook was indeed a marvel.

It had excavated in solid rock a ravine at least two hundred feet in width by a hundred in depth, and yet it was a mere thread of water!

"What a contrast between the excavation and the water in it!" exclaimed Ned. "There's hardly water enough there for the horses to drink. The great question, too, is how to get them down to it."

Bob snuffed the air dubiously, following in this an example set by Demon.

"That water is not fit to drink," he prophesied. "The place smells like a vat of chemicals!"

"I will at least taste it," returned Ned, dismounting and handing Bob his bridle.

After several vain attempts to descend to the patches of standing water, he found a spot where he could reach one of them, and hastened to lift a little of it to his lips in the hollow of his hand.

"Heavens! I never saw anything like it!" he reported, after spitting out the liquid. "It seems a cross between bilge-water, soft-soap, and vitriol! What can it be? Some mineral poison, no doubt!"

"But what's that shiny stuff in the sand on the bottom of the brook?" cried Bob excitedly, looking down from the high bank. "It looks like gold."

"Gold!" echoed Ned, startled by the tone of his comrade. "Where?"

"There! at the bottom of all those patches of stagnant water. Look under the scum which covers the surface, and take advantage of the sun's rays, getting a reflection from them. That's it—so. What do you see?"

Ned changed his position several times, and at length plunged his hand into one of the pools in question, bringing out a portion of the bright objects which had reflected the sunlight into Bob's face.

"Sure enough," he cried, in a startled voice. "It is gold."

"No mistake?"

"None. Come and see for yourself."

Bob hitched both horses to a sapling, after a keen glance around, and hurried down the steep bank to the side of his comrade.

"Gold, sure enough!" he cried breathlessly, after examining the shiny metal.

He drew out several handfuls of the shining deposits for himself, giving them a thorough examination, and was promptly confirmed in the view he had taken.

"There's no doubt about it," he declared. "These deposits are gold, and the brook is full of them. They've evidently been washed down from above."

"Or rather they've been precipitated from the rock which once filled the ravine," returned Ned, as he thoughtfully scanned the rocky declivities on each hand. "It's not a nugget formation, you see, but a precipitate from quartz, so to speak. The ore has been dissolved by some strong chemical mixed with the water flowing over it."

Bob examined the scene more closely.

The idea was a new one, but it was the only one which could account for the immense excavation which had been accomplished, and the couple could not reject it.

"Clearly enough," muttered Bob, "there is something in the hill above us, some concentrated chemical, some wonderful corrosive—what shall we call it?—which has the power to dissolve quartz, just as readily as water dissolves salt or sugar."

"It must be so," affirmed Ned, "or this gold would not be here. This work must have been going on thousands of years to produce such great quantities. We could wash out hundreds of dollars a day here, I do not doubt. But I know a trick worth two of that, and that is to ascend this extraordinary brook to its source, and see what is the substance it holds in solu-

tion, and which must necessarily be somewhere above us. Not long ago, when I was in Denver, I chanced to approach a couple of mining bosses who did not notice my presence, so earnestly were they discussing the best methods of extracting gold from the ore, and I caught the words 'corrosive alkaloid.' As you are well aware, several of the greatest mills in the West have recently begun to extract the gold from the ore by some secret process, which they guard in the most jealous manner, allowing no one to go into the rooms where the operation is effected. Now, what is thus accomplished in a small way, in the establishments in question, has been done here, on a vast scale, in broad daylight, by the hand of nature."

"You're right," returned Bob. "We have only to ascend this brook to its source to find the great solvent which has done this work—perhaps the 'corrosive alkaloid' of which those mining bosses were talking—perhaps something better. We may even find it in immense quantities. The whole mountain yonder may be composed of this wonderful solvent. If such is really the case, Ned, we shall indeed 'strike it rich,' as I have so long promised."

There was no need to say more.

The two explorers were, in fact, too excited for lengthy discussions.

No argument was necessary to show that the discoverer of a substance capable of dissolving quartz, "as water dissolves salt or sugar"—to use Bob's expressive phrase—would quickly be in a fair way to create a most tremendous sensation.

Excited and eager, almost breathless, the young explorers climbed the steep bank and took their way along its edge, leading their horses, and directing their steps toward the point where the question concerning the agent which had been instrumental in the excavation of the deep bed of the brook and in the disintegration of the rock, was to be definitely settled.

After what they had already seen, they did not doubt that they were on the verge of one of the most stupendous discoveries ever made by man!

"In good truth," resumed Ned, "it's a wretched piece of nonsense to go on in the old way of crushing quartz to get out the gold. There are solvents in nature powerful enough to literally burn up all the quartz in the world, if we can only find them. I remember reading the other day of a poison so powerful that twelve pounds of it, if set free in the atmosphere, would kill every human being on the globe! If we can apply a chemical of this concentrated sort to the disintegration of quartz, just see what a vast revolution we can introduce into the whole business of mining! We seem to be on the verge of discovering such a substance, to judge by the signs of its action around us."

The two investigators, still followed by their dog, had proceeded scarcely a quarter of a mile, every moment mounting higher and higher, when they saw that the width and depth of the ravine, at the bottom of which lay the brook, had more than doubled!

In other terms, the brook remained at nearly the same level, thus attesting that the corrosive it held in solution was of the most powerful description.

It had eaten away millions of tons of solid rock, the residue from which was still smoking in the Alkali Sink!

The same effects had been produced here, too, which had been remarked lower down, the bed of the stream remaining everywhere the same, and showing, under the rays of the sun shining into it, a gleaming band of gold!

These deposits had even grown richer with every step of the ascent, for the reason that the mass of rock disintegrated at every new point had been greater.

"At last, Ned, we have found what we wanted to find!" cried Bob, his voice husky with excitement. "No more rags and hunger for the little folks dependent upon me—my brothers and sisters!"

"That's so, Bob," assented Ned, throwing himself into the arms of the brave, honest comrade who had toiled and triumphed with him. "My sister need not delve like a slave longer! We can whoop at last, old fellow!"

They were literally wild with their joy!

CHAPTER VIII.

A WONDERFUL FIND.

FORGOTTEN, for the moment, were all the hardships to which the boys had been exposed, and all the dangers they had incurred from the red-skins.

They thought only of their golden treasures, and of the good they could do with them.

Forgotten, too, was the fact that they were virtually lost in the unknown depths of the wilderness they had invaded, inasmuch as they had not yet acquired, in the absence of the sun, the certainty that they had been traveling in the right direction.

So joyful were their actions, so many and strange their exclamations, so singular and un-

wanted their deportment, that Demon gravely drew near, looking up into their faces, with an air of wondering inquiry that was comical to witness.

"It's all right, old fellow," said Ned, patting the dog's head. "As soon as we have scooped out a ton or two of the yellow dross down yonder, we'll build you a house to live in."

On making another descent to the bed of the brook, Ned brought up a handful of deposits so rich in gold that they seemed to be filings from an immense nugget.

This confirmed the views they had taken.

"There are tons of that stuff down there," he declared, with half-suspended respiration. "Once dry it and wash away the earthy dross, or get rid of it in the furnace, and the gold could be cast directly into bricks. See! in this present form, it is really a sort of gold pudding."

But this was not all.

The higher the boys ascended the strange brook, the smaller became its volume of water, as was to have been expected, but it diminished so rapidly as to threaten a speedy total disappearance.

This, in fact, it soon did.

It was a brook without a source, a brook which had no natural springs to feed it.

There was, indeed, a slight water-shed further up the slope, which had doubtless played its part in the excavations now presented to the explorers, but no trace of an outflow from the ground.

All the water used in these tremendous excavations had had its source in rains and showers.

Continuing to advance, the boys passed some trees and bushes which had hitherto intercepted their view, when a scene burst upon their gaze which caused them to utter cries of astonishment.

What they saw was an immense circular hole in solid rock of the same type as that forming the banks of the brook.

This hole was three or four hundred feet deep, and not far from a hundred yards in diameter at the top, tapering quite regularly to a point at the bottom, somewhat in the style of a jar.

There was a hole at the bottom which led out into the brook, and consequently this jar-shaped excavation contained very little water.

Directly in front of the boys, on the opposite side of this immense hole, was a secondary plateau of the mountain slope, which was covered by coarse grasses and bushes, in such a way as to form a sort of clearing in the great forest.

"What a wonderful work of nature!" exclaimed Bob, as he clung to a sapling and looked down into the jar-shaped hole, with its somber depths and its singular blendings of lights and shadows. "We must call this thing the *Golden Jar*. There must be a vast amount of gold at the bottom of it."

"Must, Bob? Why?" asked Ned.

"Don't you see why? Naturally, all the gold liberated from the rock, while the *Jar* was being formed, would sink to the bottom."

"True enough—"

"And then, if you consider the size of the *Jar*, just calculate what you're getting."

Ned's eyes danced with excitement.

"You're right," he declared. "The bottom of that *Jar* must be literally lined with gold. Some day we'll get down there and secure the whole of it. Just now I am puzzling about that *corrosive* which is at the bottom of all these gigantic excavations. Where is its source? What is it?"

"Those are the questions we are called upon to answer," returned Bob. "Instead of wasting our time here in idle wonderment, let's look for the *corrosive* in question. Don't you see yonder, on the other side of the *Jar*, a sort of yellow earth a short distance below the surface? That may be the wonderful agent by which all these operations have been accomplished."

Ned studied the conformation of the plateau we have noticed a few moments, and then a vivid gleam of comprehension passed over his face.

"That's the very thing we're looking for," he said. "Don't you see where the water has trickled down from that yellow earth and worn gullies in the solid rock?"

"To be sure—"

"And that fact is in itself enough to show that the substance in question is a powerful *corrosive*," affirmed Ned, with an air of perfect conviction. "Let's go around to the other side of our *Jar* and investigate. My impression is that the whole mountain, or at least the whole of that bald patch ahead of us, is composed of that *corrosive*. Let's see."

The boys lost no time in making their way to the opposite side of the *Jar*, and in looking around for some of the yellow earth they had remarked in the lateral outcrop mentioned.

"We shall have trouble, it seems, to lay hands on the *corrosive*," resumed Ned. "It is covered by a layer of clay, which is in turn covered by a layer of soil, this latter forming the surface, with the bushes and grasses spring-

ing from it. Nevertheless, there ought to be a break in the clay."

He continued his search for a few moments, Bob assisting him, but the latter soon shook his head, saying:

"Of course there can be no break in the clay, or the rains would have entered the hole and gradually worn out a second excavation like our *Golden Jar*."

"That's so," agreed Ned, coming to a halt. "The whole clearing is a water-shed, and one from which the water converges directly to the side of the *Jar*, pouring into it from the edge of the precipice. Of course we can't venture to that slippery and dangerous place in quest of our *corrosive*."

"Then what is to be our course?"

"Our only way is to dig a hole through the layers of soil and clay, and thus uncover the *corrosive*," declared Ned. "But this is a work of no little time, and one requiring a good space—"

"Wait a moment," interrupted Bob, with a sudden start. "What is that yonder, in the edge of the forest? A rude shelter erected by the hand of man, if I am not greatly mistaken! Yes, a veritable hut!"

The mere thought was startling.

The young explorers looked to their defense.

"Some one must have been here ahead of us," cried Ned, moving cautiously across the clearing toward the object which had fixed his attention. "But that is not saying that we shall find them here now. Caution!"

Keeping a keen watch in every direction, and especially in the direction they were advancing, the boys approached the hut in question.

There could be no mistake about the matter.

The shelter in question, although as rude as the den of an Australian savage, had been erected by human hands.

More, as the boys reached it, they saw at a glance *why* it had been erected.

There was an excavation through the soil and clay into the "yellow earth" which had taken such hold of their thoughts.

In other terms, some explorer had been there before them!

This other explorer had come to the same conclusions as they had done about the existence of a *corrosive* in the neighborhood, and had not only sought but found it.

Carefully removing the surface layers with a spade with which he was provided, that unknown prospector had uncovered the "yellow earth" for a space about two yards square.

The spade still lay where he had left it.

The hole he had made into the *corrosive* was still visible.

It was easy to see that he had taken away three or four barrels of this strange substance.

"And the grand question now is: why didn't he continue in the business?" exclaimed Bob, after he had noticed all these evidences of the presence of this unknown precursor.

"Perhaps he got all the gold he wanted in the brook below, without making use of the solvent," returned Ned. "Perhaps he failed to find the place, after he once left it, or perhaps he died or was killed by the Indians. But it seems that he knew just what he was about. He knew that this 'yellow earth' is the *corrosive* whose tremendous effects are displayed around us, and also that it was essential to protect it from the weather. This latter motive is shown by the erection of this rude hut."

Seizing the spade mentioned, he investigated the nature of the substance underlying the soil and clay, and which he believed to be the "corrosive alkaloid" used in render-mills of Denver and other great mining centers.

The result was all he expected—more even, a thousand times more!

The whole plateau, or secondary hollow of the hillside, was one immense deposit of *corrosive alkaloid*!

Its superficial area could not be less than a hundred acres, if its extent merely conformed to that of the clearing.

How deep it was remained to be seen, but there was nothing to forbid its extension hundreds of feet downward.

Below it was the ledge of rock from which the gold in the brook had been precipitated, and above it was seen an extended outcrop of similar rock, so that this immense bed of *corrosive alkaloid* was cradled between two ledges of gold-bearing rock.

Fortunately this wonderful deposit was roofed—literally roofed—by a layer of clay, which sealed it up hermetically alike from rain and weather—or it would have been converted into a fiery solution which would have consumed the very hills around it.

These facts duly realized, the boys gave the strange substance a critical examination.

In appearance it was much like ordinary yellow soap, and could be excavated in bars and blocks, but it was not so hard as soap, being somewhat dry and crumbly, or very much like tablet magnesia.

In a dry state it could be handled without injury to the skin or to gloves, but the moment it became damp it was converted into a most violent *corrosive*—one of such vigor as to quickly

destroy all objects brought in contact with it, with the exception of clay, gold, and sundry other metals.

After some preliminary caution and skirmishing, the boys made a solution, with the aid of their water-can, of a thimbleful of the powdered *corrosive*, and tested it upon a piece of ordinary stone.

Not greatly to their amazement, but immensely to their joy, the stone was literally dissipated or consumed by the liquid poured upon it!

All that remained of it, after a minute or two of sputtering and hissing, was a thin residue of light-colored ashes!

"Let's fill a bag with the *corrosive*," proposed Ned, excitedly, as he again seized the spade. "There are plenty of mines, deserted and otherwise, in the Big Horn Valley, where we can get some regular ore for our experiments, if we ever get out of these solitudes!"

By the time the boys had filled a forage-bag with the *corrosive*, the sun began showing its whereabouts through a partial rift in the clouds, as if to bless them for their courage and resolution.

"Good!" cried Ned, as he drew out his map again. "We shall now be able to lay out our route with something like certainty!"

A revised course was soon adopted, and in a few minutes more they were leaving the immense mine of *corrosive alkaloid* behind them, and toiling anew through the unbroken wilderness, with an energy which attested how deep and earnest were their hopes.

For nearly an hour they stuck to the course they had adopted, and were then rewarded with a view of those nameless peaks which bounded the extreme limits of exploration on the side from which they were advancing, if they were to judge by the entries on their map.

"Yes, I know where we are now," cried Ned, joyfully. "The danger of getting lost is past! We're sure to get 'out of the wilderness!' By passing to the right of the nearest peak, we shall advance in a direct line toward Big Horn City. There we'll get rid of the mail-bag of poor Peter Darrell, and take a brief rest, giving a little attention to the reprobates we have come here to unearth. Some of the criminals we are looking for are said to be living at or near Big Horn City, now that I recall the fact, and it's possible that we shall be able, with Demon for our decoy or attraction, to draw some of them into the law's meshes."

Bob assented to all of these views and plans, and the couple gave their best attention to the prompt accomplishment of their journey.

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE "MINERS' REST."

DESPITE its pretentious name, Big Horn City, which was about the seventh experiment in the same line and under the same title—might as well have been called the Cross Roads or the Four Corners.

Either of these well-worn names would, in fact, have been in better taste, because more honest, and more in harmony with the facts.

It was simply a hamlet of thirty houses, mostly log cabins, some of them empty, which had slowly developed at a point where two rude trails happened to cross each other nearly at right angles.

It occupied a portion of a hollow traversed by a perennial brook, and possessed a permanent population not far from one hundred souls, including the women and children.

The notabilities were the postmaster, the doctor, the constable, and the man who kept the "Miners' Rest."

There had formerly been a lawyer, but one of his clients had seen no better way of attaining justice than to cause him to be banged to a convenient limb in a moment of popular excitement.

The place had been boomed at one time by non-resident capitalists and miners, but both capitalists and miners had long since passed on to some new land of promise, where a fresh crop of fools could be reaped without preliminary planting.

As a natural result of these varying fortunes, Big Horn City was not merely the grave of many a buried hope, but the center of half a score of deserted mines, which had fairly skeletonized the hilltops adjacent.

The Miners' Rest was kept by a man named Jake Harewood, who was a son of the pretended sheriff with whom we have had a passing acquaintance in former pages.

Jake was unmarried, and was generally regarded as a hard case, with particular reference to drinking unhallowed liquids and shunning the truth.

After a hearty supper, which he had eaten early, in order to be ready for any possible exigencies of the coming night, Jake Harewood sat at the door of his bar-room, which happened at the moment to be quite deserted, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of his favorite cigar.

He was rather stout for his years, being little past thirty, and he could lay no claim to personal attractions, but he rather fancied himself, and took good care to be always present-

able, he having a sort of vague premonition that the lady of his dreams would turn up in some strange and unexpected fashion, if she should ever be so good as to present herself in any fashion whatever.

Finding himself at leisure and alone for the first time since morning he drew a letter from his pocket, and proceeded to scan it at such length and in such a puzzled way that it would have been easy for an observer to see that he did not half-understand it.

"Two detectives," he muttered at length, impatiently, as he folded the letter and returned it to his pocket. "What is the man driving at? I can't make head nor tail of it. I shall have to wait for his promised appearance in person before I shall know what he means!"

As he looked up and around again, his gaze encountered a horseman who was approaching at an easy shamle, crossing the hollow, and who was already wafting him a friendly salutation.

"Thunder! there he is now!" he ejaculated, responding in kind to the distant greeting.

Stepping into the bar-room, from which he passed through a dining-room to a kitchen in the rear, he gave a few orders to his cook, a half-breed woman of mature age, and then sauntered back to his post of observation.

He had not been there long when the horseman rode up, exchanging verbal salutations with Harewood, and leaped lightly from his saddle, throwing his bridle carelessly over a post.

The new-comer was Ben Crump.

"Come in, Ben," invited Jake, shaking the hand of his brother-in-law heartily. "Glad to see you looking so well," and he led the way into the bar-room and hastened behind the counter, handing out a bottle and two tumblers. "When did you return?"

"Last night only," replied Ben, pouring out a moderate drink.

"Left everything all right in Helena?"

"As usual. How've you been since I saw you, and how's business? Everything is as it should be, I suppose?"

Jake nodded, touching his glass to his brother-in-law's and then proceeding to drain it.

"Got my letter, of course?" resumed Ben, as he replaced his empty tumbler on the counter, and bent a keen glance around, including a look into the empty dining-room.

"Yes; but I couldn't make out just who and what is coming. You spoke of two detectives, who would probably turn up in some queer way and in some singular disguise, but I've seen nothing of the sort thus far."

"Well, you can take my word for it, Ben, that they are not far distant," assured Crump, as he drew a chair toward him and sat down. "They've been sent here at the earnest call of the Governor of this Territory and many of its most influential citizens."

"But what do they propose to accomplish?" demanded Harewood, as he also sat down, with an air of sudden interest.

"Why, they intend to clear up all the recent mysteries which have not yet been solved, and to lay hands on all the notorious outlaws who have not yet been captured," explained Ben Crump. "I was not able to learn just who the two detectives are, or even get a list of the men they're looking for, but it's only reasonable to suppose that they're charged with that Dorsett affair, the Hy Gunnel case, and everything of that description."

"Well, forewarned is forearmed!" returned Jake Harewood, with a sullen gleam of resolution. "If they show up here, they'll hardly make any trouble afterward."

"That's the very thing I wanted to suggest," said Crump. "You can give them drink or a supper that'll do the business—as you've more than once done already. Another thing. I want you to be particularly careful not to let Gideon Dorsett regain his liberty. His wife has been writing so many frantic appeals to the governor, as has the daughter, that a special charge will no doubt be given the two detectives to find him. How is he?"

"Poorly—poorly enough! He begins to take his captivity to heart. He's losing flesh rapidly, and will either die soon or weaken!"

"Let it be the former, Jake, if it must be one or the other!" enjoined Crump, with angry and revengeful emphasis. "To think of his holding out a whole year, when you have assured him again and again that his wife and daughter are within twenty-four hours of us! Never saw such obstinacy! But if he can stick, so can we! If he does not tell us where he got that gold we took from him, let him die!"

After these remarks, it is unnecessary to say much about the status of Ben Crump.

The reader has doubtless comprehended.

At the same time that Crump was regarded as an honest man by the authorities and citizens of Helena, at the very moment when he was figuring as a member of the Helena Detective Association, and receiving information, pay and orders as such, he was in reality, and more especially, a detective in the employ of a vast number of outlaws and criminals in the Big Horn Valley and elsewhere!

In other words, he was a detective in the in-

terest of rogues and miscreants, rather than one in the interest of honest citizens.

"And what about Dabshaw?" asked Crump, abruptly, as he arose and turned his ears and gaze searchingly to the principal points of the compass with the air of a man who has learned to strike eavesdropping from his chapter of accidents. "Has he paid his share of the expenses we are incurring with Dorsett?"

"No, Ben. He makes excuses. I begin to think he's really poor."

"You've arranged affairs so that he cannot come between you and the prisoner, setting him free without your knowledge?"

"Trust me for that. I've men watching night and day, and I watch for myself. But I'm forgetting your supper," and Jake arose briskly. "I gave orders when I saw you coming—"

"I'm sorry," interrupted Crump, as he also arose. "I had a late dinner at home, and cannot eat a mouthful. Besides, I am on my way to give old Harkness a hint of the coming danger, and shall doubtless stay all night and part of to-morrow with him. I'll take another sample from that bottle with you, and be off."

"Well, if you must go, you must," declared Harewood, leading the way to the counter. "I should have been glad to have you here longer, but business is business."

The couple drank again, and then walked to the door, Harewood remarking:

"Of course I'll see you when you come back?"

"Naturally," returned Crump, as he proceeded to mount. "By the way, Jake, there are a couple of young fellows wandering in the valley, with a big black dog, who are looking for a white antelope—a couple of innocents, as your father calls them, who are carried away with the notion of securing twenty thousand dollars for an animal that never existed, unless in the imagination of some dreaming fool!"

"A white antelope!" repeated Jake, with a puzzled air. "I never heard of such a thing!"

"Nor any other sane man! The couple are cranks, of course, but harmless enough, and really amusing. They staid with us last night, and we had a good time. As you'll probably see them within a day or two, I thought I'd mention what they are, so that you'll not confound them with the infernal sneaks against whom I have warned you!"

"All right, Ben."

"Another thing, Jake," and Ben Crump leaned his face close to his brother-in-law's, "don't trust Doctor Barker, the postmaster, Constable Wilkins, or any of that crowd. Try to warn Hy Gunnel that an effort is to be made to trap him, and see that he keeps shady, in a general way, and fights shy of all strangers. That's all, I believe. Take good care of yourself, Jake! Good-by!"

The greeting was cordially returned, and Ben Crump rode away, soon disappearing over an adjacent crest, while Harewood resumed his seat and looked after him, reflecting upon what had passed between them.

He was still busy with his thoughts when footsteps resounded on the road at no great distance.

He looked up to see a small party drawing near, with the evident intention of becoming his guests for the night.

"Why, there they are now—those two white-antelope chaps Ben was telling me about, dog and all!" he said to himself, arising briskly.

Stepping to the door, he shouted the name of his stable-lad, and then advanced, with smiling civility, to receive the new-comers.

They were indeed our young heroes, preceded by Demon, and followed by their horses, with their baggage.

"You can give us a good room, with supper and breakfast, I suppose?" queried Ned, after greetings had been exchanged.

"Everything you can ask for, gentlemen," replied Harewood, with his most affable air, as if impressed by the aspect and bearing of his guests.

"What will all that cost, including feed for the horses?"

Harewood made a rapid calculation and named the amount, his charge not being at all excessive.

"Here's your money, sir," said Ned.

"No necessity—"

"Of course not," assented Ned, "but, on the other hand, it ought to be as acceptable now as later."

"Many thanks, sir," said Jake, inclining himself, as he pocketed the money. "Come in, gentlemen!" he added, seeing that his stable-boy had appeared and was leading away the horses. "You've come a long distance, I see, and must be tired. What shall I have the pleasure of offering you to drink, young gentlemen?"

"Nothing, thank you, just now," replied Ned, taking rapid note of his surroundings. "I would like you to show us to our room, as we have a few things to store there," and he glanced at Bob, who was carrying under his arm the bag containing the corrosive alkali they had

brought from their newly-discovered mine of that substance.

"Quite right," returned Jake, with a glance at the bag. "Let me relieve you, sir?"

"Never mind," returned Bob. "It's not heavy."

"This way, please," and the young explorers were promptly shown into a large room on the ground floor, adjoining the kitchen, and containing two single beds. "How'll this do?"

"This will suit us," answered Ned, with a glance from one of the two windows, as Bob deposited his bag in a corner. "Is there a key?"

"The key is in the lock, sir," said Jake, who was already turning his steps toward the kitchen. "Your supper will be ready in five minutes, gentlemen, as I happen to have given orders half an hour ago for a guest who has failed to arrive. As soon as you have washed, step into the dining-room, which you noticed on the left as you entered."

Ned nodded understandingly, and Harewood passed on to the kitchen.

"A better place than I expected to see," observed Ned, ere he proceeded to give to his toilet the attention it demanded. "Somehow the landlord's countenance seems familiar."

"A family resemblance, I presume," returned Bob. "I noticed the name on the sign is 'Harewood.' He's doubtless a son or other relative of the Harewoods with whom we stayed last night."

"Ah, that's it! But I wonder Mrs. Crump didn't tell us that she had a brother in this business, in this direction."

It did not take the boys long to wash off the dust of the day's long journeyings and otherwise improve themselves and their appearance.

"We'll leave Demon here in charge of the corrosive," then said Ned, "and to make sure that neither will be tampered with, we'll turn the key and take it with us."

By the time the hungry travelers had reached the dining-room, the cook, who was also table girl and chambermaid, as it appeared, was ready to serve their supper, and it was quickly placed before them, the host lending his assistance.

A leading question from Jake was answered by Ned in such a way as to discourage further attempts to pry into their affairs, and the couple were left to themselves.

They noticed that several persons had already collected in the bar-room, partly in consequence of the presence of the new-comers, no doubt, and partly because a large proportion of the inhabitants of Big Horn City were accustomed to gather there every evening, to talk and hear the news, and this influx continued, with accelerating vigor, so that at least a score of persons had assembled by the time the boys had finished their supper.

"We're likely to turn up here some of the rogues we're looking for," said Bob, in a guarded tone, as he remarked particularly a new arrival. "We'll use Demon of course to attract a crowd, as usual. That Hy Gunnel is said to haunt this place, and he's one of the most important of the whole batch."

"I saw a chap go into the bar-room who reminded me of the photograph which had been furnished us of Hy Gunnel," returned Ned thoughtfully. "Upon the whole, I'd better hunt up Constable Wilkins now and make all necessary arrangements."

"All right. I'll wait here for you."

Ned arose from the table quietly, passing into the hall and out of the front door, which was ajar.

CHAPTER X.

THE TALKING DOG INTERVIEWS HY.

THE night had already set in, a little darker than usual, in consequence of the covered sky, which had persisted during the entire day.

Walking along the principal street, somewhat at random, it must be confessed, as he had never honored Big Horn City with his presence previously, Ned soon stopped a boy who was in the act of entering a log-cabin, and asked him to point out the residence of Mr. Wilkins, the constable.

"That's the house, sir, right opposite," answered the lad. "And there's Mr. Wilkins now."

He pointed out a commanding figure which was approaching in the opposite direction from that Ned had himself come.

"Thanks," said Ned, and the boy vanished, while Ned hastened to place himself in the presence of the new-comer.

"Your name, Mr. Wilkins, and those of some of your neighbors have been handed me in Helena," said Ned, detaining the constable with a gesture, just as he had reached a point on the sidewalk where a light streamed out upon him from an adjacent dwelling. "I presume you have received some advices concerning me and my proposed visit. I'm Ned Wharton—"

"Ah, glad to see you, Mr. Wharton," returned the constable, offering his hand. "I've been expecting you for several days past. The gov-

ernor himself has written me about the matter in hand. What are your wishes?"

"I want to arrest Hy Gunnel," said Ned, in a guarded whisper. "I think he's at Harewood's now."

"No doubt. He's there almost every evening. But with a revolver in each pocket and several of his kind around him. Nevertheless, I should have tackled him before now if the governor hadn't written me that you would attend to the matter."

"What you'll do, therefore," said Ned, "is to speak to Doctor Barker, Postmaster McGowan and a few others in whom you have perfect confidence, and place yourself in possession at Harewood's, guarding all the entrances. As soon as all is ready, you will appear at the door of the bar-room, catching my eye, and leave the rest to me."

"I understand," said Wilkins. "I shall be ready for action in ten minutes."

"That will suit me," returned Ned, and, with one or two cautions, he turned away and returned to Bob Carpenter.

"All's arranged," he whispered. "Wilkins will have the place surrounded with a posse within ten minutes. Go and get Demon, and we'll carry out our programme, as already settled upon."

The dog was promptly produced, and the pards took their way at a sauntering pace and with a careless air into the bar-room.

Their appearance, with Demon at their heels, produced a marked sensation, every voice becoming hushed and every eye turning upon them.

The next instant Demon advanced to the counter, where he rose upon his hind legs, with his fore-paws upon the bar, having a ten-dollar greenback in his mouth, which he laid down before Jake Harewood, at the same time looking up into the innkeeper's face.

"Come up, gentlemen!" came from the dog. "Drinks and cigars, all around!"

Jake uttered a suppressed yell of terror, recoiling in such surprise as to nearly upset several of his handsomest decanters.

"A talking dog!" he gasped.

The excitement which had run through the bar-room was indescribable.

Many a face paled and many a face flushed, as every person present sprung to his feet, staring and wondering, too startled to speak.

"He means it, gentlemen," said Bob, looking around smilingly. "Walk up!"

At this invitation there was a general sigh of relief, and a general movement toward the bar succeeded, Jake soon having all he could do to respond to the demands of his customers.

There was one man, however, who seemed to hesitate about accepting the invitation, remaining in the background, near one of the front windows.

Ned turned his eye upon this man from the corner to which he himself had retreated.

Remarking that no one was giving him the least attention, all eyes being fixed upon the dog, which was still standing in his previous attitude, looking right or left at every new-comer, and seeming to give every invitee a special greeting, Ned ventured to compare the man in question with a photograph he drew gradually into the hollow of his hand from a pocket in his vest.

"That's our man!" he breathed inaudibly.

Even as Ned reached this decision the man seemed to have overcome his hesitation, or to fear attracting attention by staying away, and took his way to the bar.

"Whisky for me, Jake, and a Concha," was his order.

It was more than ten minutes before everybody was served, as new arrivals kept coming, but at last Jake picked up the ten-dollar note and passed out the change.

Demon put his paw on each piece, pulling it toward him, until all had been inspected.

"Quite right!" then came from him, as he half-turned to call Bob's attention. "Please take charge of it for me!"

In the hush that followed Demon resumed his habitual footing quietly, and walked across the floor toward Ned and Bob, sitting down near them.

At the same moment Ned remarked that Constable Wilkins was present, and exchanged a glance of intelligence with him.

"Is Doctor Barker here?" suddenly came from Demon, as he held up one of his forepaws, and looked around with an inquiring air. "I want him to look at my foot!"

The doctor was present and came forward, amid a deathlike stillness, and took the dog's foot in his hand.

To his surprise he found sticking in the foot a small thorn (which Bob had of course placed there) and drew it out, holding it up to the view of the crowd.

"There! You're all right now, my friend?" queried the doctor.

"Perfectly! Many thanks, sir!" came from the dog, as he put his foot to the floor.

"He must be the Old Scratch himself!" gasped Jake Harewood, wiping a flood of perspiration from his face and looking scared. "He knows as much as a man!"

"He hasn't yet told all he knows," said Bob, as smilingly as before. "You will see something still more surprising."

The dog sprang up and took two or three turns in the open space left him in the middle of the bar-room floor, and then sat down again.

"There's another man here I wish to see!" came from him with a toss of the head. "I wish to see Hy Gunnel!"

CHAPTER XI.

APPEARING IN THEIR TRUE CHARACTER.

HY GUNNEL was one of those swaggering, meddlesome men who are to be seen in almost every community, and who are found in a state of more or less rampant development in every county west of the Missouri.

He had long been regarded as the "Holy Terror" of the Big Horn region, where he was generally execrated and feared, save by a little knot of ruffians who took him for their model.

It was said that he had killed so many men that he had long since forgotten the exact number.

In addition to being a bully and murderer, he was an adept in every kind of thieving, from stopping a mail-coach in broad daylight to depleting a hen-roost at midnight.

His latest crime had been a murderous attack upon a couple of Eastern men, father and son, bearing the name of Moreland, who had visited the vicinity of Big Horn City to locate land.

Attempting to rob them and meeting with resistance, he had literally emptied his revolver into his victims, killing the elder gentleman outright, and leaving the son in such a state that only the devoted care of Dr. Barker for several weeks could have placed the patient on the road to convalescence.

When, therefore, Demon was heard asking for Hy Gunnel, as related, the demand produced a tremendous sensation.

"Hy Gunnel's not here!" cried Jake Harewood, bounding from behind his bar, a strange pallor replacing the usual ruddy tint of his cheeks.

At the same instant he snapped his fingers in a peculiar manner, and in accordance with a general understanding with the noted outlaw, as a hint for him to make himself scarce in any way open to him.

But Hy Gunnel had not waited for this hint from his confederate.

At the mention of his name he had stooped as far out of sight as he could and still keep his feet under him, and began moving toward the door.

But the eyes of Ned and Bob—the latter duly enlightened by his comrade—had not for an instant been diverted from their man.

"Yes, he's here!" came from Demon. "Yonder!" and the dog actually arose upon his hind feet and pointed with one of his forepaws in the direction of the desperado. "He's trying to escape!"

A pin could have been heard to drop in the extraordinary hush that followed, as the dog sat down again.

All eyes turned in the direction indicated, many of them detecting not only the outlaw's presence, but his craven attitude.

"Yes, there he is!" cried Postmaster McGowan, a man whose word was as good as his bond, and who was universally respected. "There! near the window!"

The outlaw drew himself erect, measuring the distance to the window in question, his glances at testing, as did his mien, an awful consternation.

But just at that instant the crowd in that quarter was reinforced by Dr. Barker and others in such a way as to interfere with his prospects of escape in that direction.

His gaze turned toward the front door, but there he saw Constable Wilkins, with a bearing he had never before remarked about him.

He realized, too, that the eyes of his admirers were upon him.

Another thing, no accusation had yet been formulated, not a hand raised against him.

He decided to put a bold face on the matter.

"Of course I'm here," he avowed, with his usual swaggering manner, as he elbowed his way out of the press around him, and advanced toward the two strangers and their dog. "Think I never saw anything o' this sort afore? That dog's not a talker! The talking's done by those two kids behind him! They're ventriloquists! There, Mister Dorg! Here I am, and ef you've got anything to say to Hy Gunnel, out with it!"

The dog looked quietly up into the flushed face and gleaming eyes of the desperado, and then turned and retreated a few steps, passing between Ned and Bob, and seated himself behind them.

"That's as much as to say, Hy Gunnel," said Ned, advancing a step nearer to the desperado, "that he hands you over to me!"

"And who're you, my kid?" cried Gunnel, staggering back a couple of steps, and glaring at Ned in his ugliest manner.

"I am a deputy-sheriff and detective," returned Ned, as there came over his face a look resembling a flash of lightning, "and I'm the bearer of a bench-warrant for your arrest! Hands up, if you please, my man!"

The hands of the desperado had gone down into his side pockets with significant emphasis; but he was dealing with men who knew their business, and he was seized, handcuffed and bound before a rapid enumerator could count twelve.

"Bravo!" cried Dr. Barker.

Language fails to do justice to the explosion of cheers that succeeded.

The star of Hy Gunnel had set!

Two or three of his admirers did indeed take a step or two toward him, and for an instant he hoped they would come to his rescue, but the door was the objective point of their regards and movements, and in another instant they had vanished, no one, not even Constable Wilkins, caring anything about them, now that their leader had been captured.

"Well done, gentlemen," cried Postmaster McGowan, advancing briskly and shaking hands with Ned and Bob. "I was never more surprised—more delighted! Accept my heartiest congratulations."

The example of Mr. McGowan was very generally followed, and for a few minutes our young heroes were impeded in the further extension of their task by the crowd of admirers who thronged around them.

It is probable that Hy Gunnel was both shocked and astonished to see how completely he was despised and execrated, now that the inhabitants of Big Horn City had a good chance to express their actual sentiments.

He looked around in a sort of wondering terror, as he realized that not a single friendly or sympathetic word was addressed to him, and that not a single hand was raised to detain him from the abyss into which he was so rapidly descending.

"I—I'll hear that warrant read, if you please," he gasped, all his former swagger and insolence forever gone out of him.

"Nothing is more reasonable," returned Ned, drawing the warrant from his pocket. "Silence, all!"

"Silence, all!" echoed Constable Wilkins, removing his hat as a token of respect alike for the law and for the young officers—an example which was universally followed.

The warrant was duly read, and it seemed to Hy Gunnel that it was the final nail in his coffin.

He became so weak that he could not stand, and was placed in a chair.

"Take a drop, Hy," said Jake Harewood, when the reading was finished, as he came out of his bar nearly as pale and agitated as the prisoner with a tumblerful of his best brandy, and keep a stiff upper lip. I'll see that you have a good lawyer. None of our friends here will kick a man after he's down. There's naturally some feeling against you, and it's natural for everybody to show it at such a moment, but there'll come a reaction sooner or later. You'll be all right yet, in one way or another!"

The prisoner drained the tumbler, which Jake had held to his lips while speaking.

"And now a word to you, Constable Wilkins," said Ned.

"At your service, sir," returned the constable, with a delight he did not seek to conceal at seeing his chronic eye-sore of many a month preceding in process of removal.

"You will provide yourself with a suitable escort, Constable Wilkins," ordered Ned, "and take this prisoner to jail, starting to-night or in the morning, just as you see fit, but taking care to provide everywhere and at every moment for his absolute safe-keeping."

"I take charge of the prisoner accordingly, Mr. Sheriff," declared Wilkins, his face betraying that the present moment was the proudest of his life. "Take him away, boys."

As indicated by these words, the worthy constable had made his arrangements so completely as to have two stalwart aids in waiting with a wagon, which had just driven up unobserved, and in another minute the prisoner was reclining in the body of the vehicle, with his limbs duly secured to its sides and extremities.

"Good-by, Mr. Sheriff," said Wilkins, offering his hand in turn to each of our heroes. "I shall not even return to my house to kiss my wife until the prisoner is under lock and key and bar and bolt. In this way," he added in a whisper which reached the hearing of the two boys only, "we shall utterly forestall all attempts at a rescue."

"A good point, sir," approved Ned, and the constable smiled.

Nearly all of the bystanders hastened out to the sidewalk to see the constable and his aids drive away with their prisoner, and to strain their eyes after them until they had become eclipsed by the intervening crest to which we have previously alluded.

Then there was a general scattering of the late occupants of the bar-room, four-fifths of them hastening away to bear the startling news of the night to their friends and families.

Ned and Bob, with Demon, were left almost alone with Jake Harewood, who had retreated behind his bar, and was making a great show of being busy there, although he really had no other business on hand than to conceal his agitation and excitement.

To be candid, Jake was as uneasy as a fish out of water.

He was more than half-afraid that his turn would come next, he having a great many things upon his mind of which he had never spoken to any father confessor.

But the boys hardly gave him a glance.

They called for cigars and lighted them, taking a turn or two in the bar-room, with a glance from the door in the direction Wilkins had gone, and then Ned sauntered up to the bar.

"If you will give us a light, Mr. Harewood," he said, "we'll go to our room. We've had quite a long jaunt to-day, and intend to get to bed in good season."

"Here's a light, gentlemen," returned Jake, handing down one of the large lamps used habitually at the bar. "You know the way. You'll let me know if you require anything, no matter what may be the hour. I sleep at the head of the stairs. Good-night, gentlemen. I hope you'll get a good night's rest."

And with this he escorted the couple to the door of their room, taking leave of them with the profoundest inclination of his body he had ever expended upon any human being.

"They a pair of innocents!" he muttered, as he paused at the door of the dining-room and looked in the direction of the apartment occupied by the boys. "What was Ben giving me, with his talk about cranks and white antelopes? These chaps are the very detectives of whom he was speaking!"

As he returned to the bar-room, he saw that the last of its late occupants had vanished.

"So much the better," he ejaculated. "I'll close the shanty immediately. That'll leave me free to take such action as may be essential!"

He acted upon the thought, and then seated himself at one of the windows of the dining-room in such a way as to command a view of the door and the street, giving himself up to reflection.

A half-hour had passed, when a couple of men came stealthily up to the door, leading their horses, and knocked cautiously for admittance.

Jake raised the window a few inches and peered out.

"Who's there?" he cautiously demanded.

"It's me, Jake," was the answer, in a whisper. "Harkness is with me. Let us in. Important!"

Jake hastened to comply, admitting Ben Crump, and the kindred spirit he had intended to pass the night with—the latter a grim-visaged man, some sixty years of age, whose hair had grown white with deeds of violence and spoliation.

"What's up?" asked Jake, all in a tremor, as he led the way into the bar-room.

"We might ask you the same question, I think," said Ben Crump, with a wondering glance at the agitated features of his brother-in-law. "But I hasten to answer. I met Harkness on the road, a good ways this side of his house. He was coming to see us. He has received a letter from his brother in Helena, who writes that those two white-antelope chaps of whom I was speaking are really the two detectives—"

"Oh, yes! I've found it out," interrupted Jake Harewood, with an oath. "They've been here and arrested Hy Gunnel, who is now on his way to jail!"

The new-comers heard the announcement with an awful consternation.

"Where are they now?" asked Ben Crump.

"In that back room I generally give you!"

"Here! Then why can't something be done? Did they call for any liquor before going to roost?"

"No, Ben."

"Then take up a bottle of your best, and fix it so that a thimbleful is sure death!"

"Good. Perhaps it can be done."

He hastened to "fix" a bottle of brandy, in the way suggested.

"Suppose they won't have it?" he then queried.

They put their heads together for a moment and debated.

"I'll tell you the only other thing we can do," said Ben Crump. "We'll go with you to the door. We'll all have our revolvers in our hands. If they accept the brandy, well and good. If they don't, we'll burst in upon them, and kill them before they can draw their tools!"

"Good!" returned Jake. "Slip off your boots and follow me!"

The trio soon took their way to the door of the room which had been assigned the young strangers, and Jake knocked for admittance.

There was no response.

"They can't be asleep so soon," he declared, and with this he knocked again.

Still the same silence.

Jake applied his eye to the keyhole, at the same instant turning the knob.

The door yielded immediately and he opened it.

There was no light in the room—no sign of a guest.

The boys had vanished, with their dog and

baggage—totally vanished—without leaving behind them the least clue to their course and destination!

CHAPTER XII.

A BRAVE GIRL'S ACT.

As is so often the case with men in their dealings with the gentler sex, Harrold Dabshaw had taken the quiet ways of Olla Dorsett as a measure of capacities, and hence had formed no adequate conception of her latent forces.

While he plied the whip upon his horse, therefore, yelling like a Comanche, after getting Olla and her mother into his wagon, in the manner set forth in preceding pages, he was really as calm within as the zephyrs of a summer morning.

In other words, his fury was all on the surface—was merely assumed for a purpose.

At the gait he was going, he knew that the mother and daughter would not dare throw themselves out of the wagon.

To have done so would have been to incur very great risk of being killed on the spot.

That course being out of the question, what would remain to them?

To let themselves be carried over the precipice?

To take the reins from his hands, or save themselves by any other feat of strength and activity?

These questions did not even occur to him.

Blinded by his mistaken conception of Olla, he said to himself that she would see but a single way out of her awful dilemma.

She would hear her mother's shrieks and be moved by them.

She would even shrink from her imminent peril upon her own account.

In short, realizing that he was indeed the arbiter of her destinies, she would lay her hand upon his arm and beg him to save them, to spare them, to be merciful, and would promise to give him in return her hand in marriage.

He smiled inwardly—even while the wagon was dashing along the rude road with such dangerous velocity—at the very simplicity of his project.

But the appeal and the promise so fully expected did not come!

Now that she knew who he was, all her late scorn and contempt—all her righteous wrath—took possession of her soul again.

She would have sooner died than ask him for a single favor, kindness, or even civility.

Not a single thought or aspiration of her soul took the route or form he had so hopefully laid out for them.

She became so quiet that Dabshaw stole a glance behind him to see if she had not fainted.

What a calm, defiant face was that she turned toward him!

He saw at a glance that his hopes would not be realized—that she would not weaken!

And now it was high time to act in his own interest and for his own safety.

The wagon was already frightfully near the precipice, and the horse in a fair way to become uncontrollable, if there should occur any break in the vehicle or harness.

Speaking soothingly to the frightened steed, he drew rein with the earnestness the occasion demanded, as also with the success so necessary to his own escape.

His intention was to be moving at a moderate pace only by the time the tree was reached to which he had alluded.

That point secured, he knew that he could tear Olla out of the wagon, whatever might be her resistance, and save her at the same moment he saved himself, leaving Mrs. Dorsett to go over the precipice with the horse and wagon.

The girl would thus remain in his hands, and her mother would be out of the way.

He was nearly as eager for the last two of these results as for the first.

Since the detection of his attempts at poisoning Mrs. Dorsett, he had hated her almost as fiercely as he loved Olla.

He was even beginning to be afraid of her, realizing only too keenly what trouble she could make him if she were to get out of his clutches.

He had slowed to the desired extent, and was about to complete his design, when Olla reached out and seized the left rein with a firm grasp, drawing the horse's head to one side so as to secure a good mark, and lodging a bullet in the base of its brain from her revolver.

It was done so quickly and was so entirely unexpected and unforeseen, that Dabshaw only became aware of it after it had been accomplished.

The sound of the revolver even tended to confuse him for a few moments, his first impression naturally being that he himself was the object of her attentions.

Fortunately the horse did not drop immediately, although Olla had provided for such an emergency by taking her mother in the firmest grasp possible and bracing her feet against the seat ahead of her as soon as the fatal shot had been fired.

There succeeded indeed a perceptible shock,

which was not without its dangers to Dabshaw, but the animal continued to advance in a staggering and mechanical way for a rod or two, gradually slowing its pace, and then it fell dead, all in a heap, at the very instant it arrived under the overhanging limb of the tree which had figured so largely in Dabshaw's project!

The final crash, in bringing the vehicle to an abrupt halt, shook up its occupants considerably, but it had been going too slow for them to be thrown out.

"Come, mother," said Olla, as soon as the wagon had come to a full stop.

She leaped out lightly, with her revolver still held in her right hand in readiness for use, and assisted Mrs. Dorsett with her left.

At seeing how the case stood, and especially at seeing that Olla was safe on the ground and in possession of her liberty, with her mother beside her, the baffled plotter realized, more clearly than ever, that nothing had yet been accomplished in the desired direction.

As desperate as annoyed, the old villain leaped lightly to the ground and advanced menacingly toward Olla.

"Not another step, sir!" she cried, facing him undauntedly and raising her revolver. "A step more, and you die!"

"Nonsense!" he responded. "You know you would not dare kill me! Think of having the blood of a human being upon those fair hands!"

"The fault will be your own, Harrold Dabshaw! I've given you fair warning! You must not molest me or my mother! Our patience is exhausted with these long persecutions. You must henceforth leave us in peace!"

"But what can you do, Olla? Where can you go?"

"No matter where, so long as we are not at your mercy," answered Olla, without the least sign of weakening. "Better a den in the woods with wild beasts for our companions, than to share a palace with such a conscienceless monster as you have shown yourself. Stand back, I say, or I will fire!"

Dabshaw did not hardly believe her capable of executing this menace.

Another thing—as he marked her radiant beauty, heightened as it was by her dauntless bearing, his wild passion for her increased to such an extent as to blind him to his danger, or to render him heedless of it.

He would have doubtless taken the chances, therefore, of a swift and sudden advance, with a view to disarming her, had he not at that moment caught a glimpse of his man, who was approaching rapidly in the edge of the forest by which the road was bounded.

At this promise of assistance the villain thrilled with joy.

"Caution!" he cried, in a loud tone, drawing his revolver and making a feint of attacking the girl and her mother, although taking care not to approach too near. "You can be secured! You see how easy it is!"

His words were intended for the new-comer, and they were duly comprehended and heeded.

While Dabshaw continued his cries and menaces, dancing about like one possessed, and keeping the attention of the ladies concentrated upon himself, his man crept up behind them as rapidly as noiselessly, and in a few moments more sprung to Olla's side, seizing her two arms and pinioning them as in a vise.

The brave girl succeeded in discharging her revolver again, but without result, as her captor held her hand in such a way that the bullet entered the ground not two yards beyond her.

The next instant Dabshaw tore the revolver from her grasp, securing it upon his own person.

"There, miss!" he cried, as he lent his assistance to his man in the final struggle. "Enough of that! You'll fight us in vain! Down with her, Bowser! Strangle her if necessary! I'd sooner kill her than let her escape us!"

A wild cry came from Mrs. Dorsett—a cry half shriek and half groan—and she sunk down in an inert mass at the feet of the combatants, her senses having left her, partly as a consequence of her wild ride, and partly because of the terror produced by the terrific struggle going on between Olla and her villainous assailants.

"Good!" cried Dabshaw, with a glance at the motionless figure. "We're rid of the old woman! Hold her hands, Bowser! Another effort! There!"

The victory was won!

CHAPTER XIII.

A DEMON'S PLOT.

PANTING and breathless, with a deathly white face, Olla lay helpless at the feet of her captors, but not without having inflicted upon their faces and forms ample proofs of the battle.

"Bind her fast," enjoined Dabshaw. "Bind her hand and foot. Bowser! No mercy! No hesitation! I've had enough of her tantrums! There are plenty of ropes under the front seat. I can hold her now," and he drew her hands together. "Lively!"

The girl's further resistance signified very

little, and she was soon as powerless as a child, her captors fairly inlacing her in the cords with which Dabshaw had equipped himself for his masquerade.

"There! she'll make us no more trouble!" exclaimed the miscreant, when he had reduced the girl to the desired helplessness. "Now to place her in the wagon."

Bowser helped him in this proceeding.

"Her mother now!"

Poor Mrs. Dorsett was also placed in the wagon.

"I'll now cut the horse in pieces, while you throw the fragments over the precipice," pursued Dabshaw, producing a long knife from under the seat he had been occupying. "That'll be the readiest way of getting rid of him. But first we'll take off the harness."

The harness having been duly removed and deposited in the vehicle, Dabshaw proceeded to cut up the horse.

It was astonishing how quickly the task was accomplished.

Dabshaw's knowledge of the anatomy of the horse, as displayed in this performance, was simply perfect.

His knife did not once come in contact with a bone, but found at the first thrust the articulation to which it was directed.

As fast as he detached the different fragments, they were carried to the precipice by Bowser, and flung into the valley below.

At the end of five minutes, a few pools and spatters of blood were all that remained to indicate where the horse had fallen.

"The next shower will get rid of all that remains," muttered Dabshaw, indicating the pools of blood by a gesture, as he set about cleaning his hands and knife on the grass.

"Or the wolves," suggested Bowser. "I saw six more last night, sir. Three of them came close to the stable!"

"Indeed!" returned Dabshaw, as a strange gleam came into his eyes. "We shall have to take measures to reduce them! We shall have to scatter a little more poisoned bait in the neighborhood! A few of them are no inconvenience, but we must keep them under!"

His hands and knife having been cleaned, as far as he could clean them in the manner indicated, he glanced at the broken, thills of the wagon, and bent a keen glance around.

"It's fortunate you came as you did, Bowser," he said, "or I should have had trouble with that young tigress. You heard the noise of the runaway, I suppose? That is how you happened to turn up so opportunely?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were just in time. At an early day I'll make you some special acknowledgment. Meanwhile, we may as well be getting the wagon back to the house. Enough of the thills remain to steer and draw by. You may place yourself in front, and I will push behind."

In this way the vehicle, with Olla and her mother in it, was soon back to the stable, which was a large and handsome structure, corresponding in every way to the size and display of the house.

"You can put another pair of thills into the wagon, I suppose?" resumed Dabshaw.

"In a very few minutes, sir. There is an extra pair to this very wagon."

"Then substitute them for these broken ones, and be as quick as you can about it. When ready, hitch the black to the wagon and wait for me here!"

Nodding understandingly, Bowser set about execution of these orders.

"And now, Olla," said Dabshaw, turning his baleful eyes upon the girl, "I must give you a little further attention."

The maiden looked at him in a horrible sort of dismay, but she did not make any response.

She had not uttered a single cry for assistance since her capture, nor did she utter any now, for the simple reason that she knew such a proceeding would be useless.

She realized that there was not a single abode or a single human being within a day's journey.

"Fortunately you are helpless," continued Dabshaw, as contentedly as bitterly. "You can wag that eternal jaw, if you choose, and a precious lot of good it will do you. But you cannot prevent me from disposing of you as I see fit."

"Harrold Dabshaw, what are your intentions?"

"You'll know that later!"

"What do you intend to do with my mother?"

"Even that information shall be given you in due course."

"Mother! Beware—"

"I can listen to all that at my leisure," interrupted Dabshaw. "For the present, you'll have to excuse me for attending strictly to business."

He seized her, raised her in his stout hands, threw her across his shoulder as if he had been handling a sack of flour, and hurried with her up the walk leading to the rear entrance of the house, into which he disappeared.

He was absent from Bowser's view a few moments only, and then he came back alone, and proceeded to transfer the harness from the wagon to the horse to which he had alluded.

In a few moments the thills were in readiness and the horse was placed between them.

Then the couple gave their attention to Mrs. Dorsett, whose features were deathly pale, and who gave no sign of life.

"Evidently she's dead," inferred Bowser. "The shock has been too much for her! I cannot see that she's breathing!"

Dabshaw bent nearer.

"Nor I," he said. "So much the better. I will take her into the woods a mile or two, and leave her bound to a tree, dead or not! Those wolves of whom you were speaking will find her before morning."

With a glance at the setting sun, he sprung into the wagon, seized the reins and drove quietly away.

"You can remain here till I come back," he said, looking back. "I've locked the house, and left the girl where she will be quite safe until my return."

Bowser nodded understandingly, and Dabshaw went joyfully on his way.

CHAPTER XIV.

WOLVES AND A WEAK WOMAN.

IT was a strange drive that followed.

"Living or dead," was the thought of the merciless man, as he looked back at the motionless figure of Mrs. Dorsett, "I shall be rid of her. And it is time. She begins to hang like a millstone upon me."

Night had set in almost as soon as he left home, and he had entered the almost interminable forest at the same moment, but he did not seem at all inconvenienced by the shadows closing around him.

He had evidently traversed those woods so often as to know them thoroughly, and to be as much at his ease therein by night as by day.

Notwithstanding that there was hardly the trace of a trail in that vast solitude, he had no difficulty in finding ample space for the wagon to pass freely.

After driving a couple of miles, he drew rein and listened a moment, looking back at his prisoner inquiringly.

Her status seemed unchanged, except that her breathing had become audible.

In other terms, it was heavier.

She was unmistakably alive.

"That fact does not matter," was his comment upon this discovery. "Dead or alive, I'm going to rid myself forever of her."

With this, he drove on.

There was not the least trace of rejoicing in his aspect or mien, however, and it would have been easy to see that he was far from pleased with the situation.

As completely as Mrs. Dorsett and Olla were in his hands, he knew that the results he had attained could not be regarded as a triumph.

He could crush them, but he could not make them love him.

There was nothing in their relations to him to brighten his lot.

Alone, an outcast, with outcasts for his only associates, he could not hope for happiness in the future any more than in the past.

But he was none the less determined—as desperately as daringly determined.

The look of grim determination which had settled upon his features sufficiently proved that.

The triumph of brute force being all that was left him, he was determined to have it.

To fling out Mrs. Dorsett to the wolves, whatever might be her condition, was merely to add another link to the long chain of crime his life presented.

To hold Olla in a terrible captivity in his lone dwelling, was an act for which he could not possibly experience the slightest compunction.

"They would have it so!" he ejaculated, in a sort of quiet fury. "I have been gentle and patient. I have wooed the girl as considerately as any man could have wooed her. She did not know, or even suspect, that I was instrumental in the mysterious disappearance of her father. Then why didn't she accept my attentions? What is there so very repulsive about me? Why?"

He was interrupted by a prolonged groan from Mrs. Dorsett.

Clearly enough, she was recovering her consciousness.

She even stirred, as he again glanced at her.

But this did not matter.

His purpose was fixed.

His countenance may have been rendered a little gloomier by this circumstance, but it also became more resolute.

His thoughts merely turned from vain regrets to the business in hand.

Touching his horse with the whip, he proceeded several miles at a lively trot, following a clearing that ran parallel between a small stream and a range of foot-hills.

During this time the groans of Mrs. Dorsett had become more frequent, and he at length re-

marked that she had opened her eyes and placed herself in a more comfortable attitude.

But she did not speak, and he was not yet ready to address her.

Turning into another vast stretch of forest, he drove among trees as remarkable for their size as for their overhanging branches, and here the shadows became so dense that he was forced to bring his horse to a walk.

And here, too, he began to look around inquiringly, as if conscious of having gone far enough for the purpose he had in view.

He changed his course often enough and radically enough to leave his pursuer perfectly confused in regard to his bearings, and then said to himself that there was no necessity of prolonging his journey further.

The bark of a wolf at no great distance confirmed him in this view, and he drew rein.

"Where are we?" demanded Mrs. Dorsett, as the wagon came to a halt.

"Ah, you're alive, then?" he returned.

"Alive? Certainly! Why should it be otherwise? I've not taken any more of your remedies," and she moved her lips rapidly to assure herself of the taste in her mouth. "You have not forced anything down my throat while I was unconscious. I was simply in a swoon. Where is my daughter?"

"I left her at the house."

"In what part of the house?"

"In my wine-vault, if you must know," replied Dabshaw. "As you're aware, it is a sort of dungeon. Your daughter would not be able to make her escape in my absence, even if she were free, or if Bowser were willing to help her."

Mrs. Dorsett sighed profoundly.

She knew that Olla was not free, and that any assistance from Bowser was out of the question.

As for the wine-vault referred to, she was aware that it had been originally designed for other uses than the storage of wines.

"Well, here you are, as lively as ever," resumed Dabshaw, as the bark of his natural ally again reached his hearing. "I might have known that women of your sort do not die so readily. Allow me to help you out."

He sprung out himself, lightly, hitching his horse to a tree, and then advanced to the side of the wagon.

"And why help me out?" asked Mrs. Dorsett.

"Because we have reached our destination."

"Do you intend to leave me here?"

"Such is my intention."

Still regarding him with a stern air of reprobation, the lady seemed to hesitate a moment as to her course.

Then she realized that all appeals would be wasted upon him.

"I can get out without your help," she declared with icy scorn.

She set about the task.

"Not too fast," enjoined Dabshaw, taking her by the arm, while he drew some stout ropes from under the seat he had occupied in the wagon.

"What would you do?"

"Simply assure myself that you will not by any possibility turn up at my house again."

"You mean by that—"

"That I am going to bind you to one of these trees, so—so that—"

"So that the wolves will eat me!"

As hardened as he was, this undisguised view of the matter seemed to give Harrold Dabshaw a sort of chill.

"You would have it so," he muttered.

"How have it so?"

"You have encouraged your daughter in her refusals of my offer of marriage."

"I will not deny that," returned Mrs. Dorsett, as a stern light flashed from her eyes and swept over her face. "If for that I deserve to be eaten by wolves, so be it! I'd sooner be eaten by wolves than see my daughter accept your offers!"

"This way!" was Dabshaw's comment.

"Whither!"

"To that small tree, there," and Dabshaw pointed out the object of his remark.

"And when I am there?"

"I shall make you fast to it—that's all."

"And then leave me?"

"Yes—I shall then leave you."

Mrs. Dorsett walked quietly to the tree indicated, in a way which showed that she did not intend to offer the least resistance.

In fact, she could not have done so.

She was as helpless as a child would have been, in the hands of that strong and unscrupulous man.

He kept close to her side, his savage glances fixed upon her, the ropes dangling impatiently in his hands.

"So—that will do," he said, as she placed her back to the tree, which was a small one, scarcely larger than his arm. "I have chosen a small tree so that I shall not be all night in binding you to it."

The lady did not answer—neither resisted nor pleaded.

Well she knew that a show of resistance would render his task easier, as the cold-bloodedness of his act would disappear in the same

proportion with which anger and excitement might be called into play, and she determined not to give him even this poor excuse.

She remained silent and motionless while he passed a rope two or three times around her, beginning with her ankles.

At length he stepped back, giving a final glance at his work.

"Are you satisfied with it?" she asked, in the same calm tones as before.

"Perfectly. That will hold you."

"Then leave me. The bark of your friend, the wolf, tells me that he is coming nearer. I would have a few last moments with my thoughts before he arrives. Leave me!"

"You—you have no wish to make terms with me, Mrs. Dorsett?"

"No terms can be made with you, you monster!"

"I will save you, even yet, if you will agree to force Olla to marry me."

"You simply waste your breath. I've nothing more to say. It is wasted breath."

"Listen! Hear that?"

The lady *did* hear it—the blending of the bark of several wolves in a chorus—but did not make the least comment.

"I'll go, then," said Dabshaw, after waiting uneasily a few moments. "It's time for me to be looking to my own safety. There was indeed no necessity of leaving you bound to that tree—only I am resolved to make a dead certainty of your disappearance. You might wander days in this forest before finding your way out of it. Even if I were to turn you loose, you'd be surrounded and pulled down by those fellows before going a mile. But enough! You would have it so. I leave you to your fate!"

He unhitched his horse, sprang into the wagon, and drove away without a single glance behind him, soon vanishing from view in a direction quite the contrary of his proper course.

If he had looked back just as he was passing out of sight he would have been singularly edified by an event which followed his withdrawal from the scene.

The moment he had left her to herself, Mrs. Dorsett made a desperate effort to break the rope which detained her.

She might as well have spared her strength, so far as the rope was concerned, for she did not make the least impression upon it, but she nevertheless attained a most marvelous result.

In a word, the tree to which Dabshaw had tied her had long since died of dry rot—a fact he had failed to notice in the darkness.

It still stood only because there had been no recent high winds, or because it was peculiarly sheltered from the winds by the giant trees around it.

In the midst of her struggles, therefore, at a moment when she was bracing herself against the tree with all her strength, it suddenly gave way at the ground and fell with her.

She was not a little bruised and shaken, as well as surprised, but the tree had fallen beneath her, and no serious injury had resulted to the captive.

A few moments she lay quiet, not realizing exactly the bearing of this event upon her fortunes, and then a wild hope surged into her heart.

What was there to prevent her from slipping the coils of her rope over the end of the trunk of the tree, almost as readily as one slips a series of stitches over the end of a needle?

To think was to act, and the next instant the lower coil of the rope, that encircling her ankles, was duly cast off.

The rest followed, as a matter of course, and in another moment she was again in possession of her freedom.

For a brief space she lay as if stunned or bewildered, so sudden and unexpected had been her deliverance, and then she arose to her knees, pouring out her soul in grateful thanks and rejoicings.

With what joy she at length gained her feet, looking around, need not be stated.

It was like a return from the grave.

To be sure, she was still in peril, lost in a great forest, at night, with wolves gathering around her.

But she was free.

This was the great essential.

To return to Olla was the one great thought which now took possession of her.

As was only too natural, however, she directed her steps in the direction in which Dabshaw had vanished.

She had not gone far, too, before the renewed barking of the wolves reminded her that she was beset by an imminent peril.

These wild creatures were evidently coming nearer, as if aware of the presence of a human being in those solitudes.

They had doubtless heard the wagon, as it came and went, and the sound had appealed alike to their instinct and hunger.

For a few moments she stood irresolute, a reaction from all she had recently felt and suffered having left her strangely weak in every limb.

Then she looked about for a tree suited alike to her wants and conditions—one in which it

would not be too difficult for her to gain a footing, and in which she would have a suitable support and resting-place.

Not seeing anything answering to her wants, she continued to walk onward.

She took this course all the more readily because she wanted to get out of the vicinity where Dabshaw had left her.

She knew that he would be there in a day or two to assure himself of the result of his action in the matter, and she was anxious to get as far as possible from the spot in which he had left her to die.

She accordingly continued to walk on and on, dividing her attention between the tree she was looking for and the wolves which might at any moment force her to take refuge in it.

On and on—she knew no more in what direction than to what fate.

CHAPTER XV.

THE GREAT MINING SECRET.

At an early hour of the morning subsequent to their abrupt disappearance from the "Miners' Rest," Ned and Bob, with Demon at their heels, as usual, could have been seen leading their horses up one of the long slopes to be found in the vicinity of Big Horn City.

They were as bright and sunny as the day itself, which was one of the fairest they had seen for many a month.

They had reached the narrow pass, through which they were toiling slowly, conversing by the way, when they met Jake Harewood coming down.

"Ah! good-morning, gentlemen," cried Jake, in an off-hand manner, which no one would have suspected of being a mask for treachery and crime, as he drew rein to give them a chance to pass. "You took such sudden leave of me last evening that I fancied there must have been some cause of complaint, although I can't even imagine what it can be."

"We merely decided to go out and spend the evening with a friend without disturbing you," returned Ned, quietly. "We noticed that you had closed the house earlier than usual. No disrespect was intended, no dissatisfaction experienced, and as we had paid for all we had called for—"

He finished with a significant smile.

"Certainly, it's all right," declared Jake, putting that smile into words. "I had supposed you to be far away this morning, but since you are not, I hope to see you again at the 'Rest.' You will receive at any time a hearty welcome."

Nods of adieu were exchanged, and Jake rode on, with a countenance as full of curiosity as of hypocrisy.

"Of course he has some reason for this early ride," said Ned, as soon as Jake had vanished below the pass mentioned. "What can it be?"

"The only certainty in the case," returned Bob, "is that his 'reason' is foreign to our presence here, inasmuch as we have not said a word to any human being about our proposed ride in this direction."

"No, not even to Doctor Barker, who has entertained us so handsomely," declared Ned. "It's clear enough, therefore, that the visit of our whilom host to the hills at such an hour must have a moving cause with which we are not acquainted."

Continuing to mount higher and higher, the young explorers at length reached a barren and rocky elevation from which they could overlook a considerable tract of the Big Horn Valley, as well as two or three deserted mines at no great distance from them.

"Times have changed since all these mines were being worked," resumed Ned, after a pause. "There must have been a hundred miners on these hills a few years ago, and to-day we shall not meet one, in all probability, either in going or coming. Better ore has been found elsewhere, in a spot where it is more easily accessible, and that fact soon closed out the boom in this quarter."

"I am glad we have such a fine day for our experiments," said Bob, as he righted the bag of corrosive alkaloid, which had become somewhat disarranged upon the back of his horse. "Are we in sight of the mine where you propose to test the value of our find?"

"Not yet," replied Ned. "The spot we are seeking lies under that peak to the left of us. It is indicated on our map by the words 'deserted mine.' I remember asking the author of our map, who had been all over this region in person, something about the deserted mine in question. It was discovered by a Colonel Graham at the time of the earliest immigration to this vicinity. The colonel spent a great deal of money in excavations and shafts, and was putting down a handsome plant when the Crows made a raid up the valley and completely wrecked the whole enterprise. Doctor Barker says that there is very rich ore there, as we can see for ourselves, there being a great deal of it lying around the entrance of the principal shafts."

"The colonel was killed by the red-skins, was he not?" asked Bob.

"Yes, or by a discharged miner, disguised as a red-skin, it was never known exactly which."

"And since then the place has been deserted?"

"Precisely as we shall now find it."

"Of course the mine is open to the first comer who chooses to take possession?"

"Exactly, under certain formalities, as neither Graham nor any one else ever perfected a title to it."

The scene seemed to grow more and more desolate with every step taken by the young explorers, although signs of previous occupancy continued to be everywhere visible.

But gradually the interest of our young heroes in it narrowed down to a more personal application, and at length they became so eager for the solution of the problem occupying their thoughts that they sprang into their saddles and dashed forward at a smart gallop, the road they were following being a reasonably good one.

In due course they were at their destination, where they dismounted, hitching their horses.

"Is this the place?" asked Bob, a little nervously.

"The very spot!"

The couple stood upon the brink of the great central cavity of the mine, a jagged and irregular excavation two or three acres in extent, and extending in places hundreds of feet into the earth.

Upon a rocky point near them was a tall and stout derrick, from the top of which five or six ropes of galvanized iron extended in various directions.

Not far from the derrick was a ruined steam-engine, with a number of shafts, pulleys, wheels, and other machinery, including pumps, all in a broken and useless condition.

The charred timbers and blackened site of a large store-house formed another notable feature of the scene, and a short distance away, at the edge of a forest whose foremost trees had been seared and blanched by fire, were the ruins of several small dwellings which had been occupied by the vanished miners.

"There's still plenty of gold here?" resumed Bob Carpenter, as the couple unslung their rifles and leaned them against the stump of a tree.

"Tons and tons of it," answered Ned Wharton. "The only trouble is that it's a tremendous task to extract it from the rock in which it is imbedded. See here!"

He waved his hand over a great pile of quartz in the lump which lay at the entrance of a burnt-out shaft, where the dead and vanished miners had left it years before.

"There's gold in every one of those lumps," continued Ned. "But what a task to pass it under the crushers! What power, what machinery is requisite! What patience and capital one needs to seek gold in that fashion! No wonder both capital and patience are exhausted in the search!"

While speaking, Ned's excitement had increased perceptibly, and it was with a sudden pallor of anxiety that he now stepped to the pile of broken quartz, detaching from it a block which must have weighed a hundred pounds, and depositing it at the feet of his companion.

"Gold, sure enough!" cried Bob, as he scanned the block of quartz and passed his hand over its rough surface. "See how it shines and sparkles in the sunlight!"

"Yes, Bob, and that tells the story! This is no common ore, but unusually rich. I've seen a very good ore which looked as dull as an ordinary stone. There's an ounce of gold at least in this piece of rock, if these streaks pass entirely through it. Let's get to work!"

Stepping back to his comrade's horse, Ned removed from the animal's back the bag of corrosive alkaloid they had secured at the plateau of *The Golden Jar*.

"As I told you, Bob," he continued, "we shall find here everything we need for our experiments. First, plenty of quartz. Second, all sorts of picks and spades and every kind of tool. Thirdly and lastly, plenty of water within a few rods of us."

He indicated by a gesture a tiny brook which tumbled into view musically from a neighboring side-hill, and hastily resumed:

"If I'm not mistaken, the surface under our feet is clay. Just back of you—yonder," and he pointed out the spot, "is a small, deep depression which will hold a thousand gallons, and into which we can readily conduct the water from the brook. You see, therefore, how easy it is to make a solution of our 'Quartz Solvent' and settle all questions concerning its value and use."

"I see," returned Bob Carpenter, with the earnestness of a great anxiety. "Let's not lose a moment."

He produced a couple of rusty and somewhat damaged spades from an overturned tool-chest near the principal entrance of the mine, and began cutting a channel the size of a furrow from the depression in question to the brook.

In this task he was so heartily seconded by Ned that it was soon completed.

The water began flowing in the new channel, the young heroes watching it with bated breath until the pool at their feet had attained to the

desired width and depth, and then they cut off the supply of water with a few hasty strokes of their spades, leaving twenty-five or thirty barrels of the liquid at their disposal.

"There's the tub we require," said Ned. "We've only to add the solvent."

His pallor increased as he partially emptied the bag into the pool and gently stirred the water with a piece of board until the mysterious substance had entirely disappeared, it being held in solution.

"Now to know our fate," he added, shutting his lips tightly together.

Seizing the block of quartz, of which mention has been made, he deposited it in the pool, taking care not to let his fingers come in contact with the liquid.

Instantly there was a hissing sound, as if the piece of quartz had been a hot iron.

Instantly, too, a cloud of steam and smoke arose, somewhat like that which accompanies the slacking of lime, although much more violent.

The piece of quartz began to disappear under the excited gaze of the watchers as rapidly as if it had been a lump of sugar or salt.

In less than a minute only a few noisy and agitated bubbles attested where the block of quartz had been placed in the pool.

"You see, Bob?" gasped Ned Wharton, as white as a sheet. "It is as I told you."

"It is indeed," returned Bob Carpenter, with a joy as great as that of his companion. "That 'Quartz Solvent'—as we have agreed to call it—will do even more than we had ventured to hope. We can dissolve mountains with it."

"At the same time liberating all the gold in them," supplemented Ned. "Oh, is it not glorious, Ned? We're richer than the richest man in America. We can be the money-kings of the world."

We need not pause to record all the ardent and enthusiastic exclamations that escape the young miners. It is even unnecessary to mention how frequently they embraced each other, as they thought of the loved ones they had left behind them. It was more than a minute before they could resume their labors, and by this time the pool's boiling and bubbling had ceased.

"Let's put in at least a hundred pieces of the quartz," proposed Bob—"enough to see if the bite of our powder is lasting. It seems to me that its energy is too fierce to be permanent."

"The point can soon be decided," returned Ned. "We've only to act upon your suggestion."

The young miners worked diligently a few minutes, neither pausing nor speaking until they had deposited in the pool at least two hundred pieces of quartz, several of which were so large that it required their united strength to carry them.

How the pool boiled and bubbled!

What a cloud arose from it!

How rapidly the lumps of quartz disappeared beneath the action of the strange solvent!

The young heroes continued their labors until the pool had become so hot and agitated that they shrunk from approaching it, and then they seated themselves near their rifles and watched the strange and exciting process they had undertaken.

Ere long the last piece of quartz vanished from their gaze, undermined and dissolved from beneath, and the ebullition of the pool subsided until it had become comparatively quiet.

"Could anything be better?" then queried Ned Wharton, with forced calmness, as he sprung to his feet. "We'll now empty the pool by cutting a drain on the lower side."

The proposition was duly acted upon, the solution which had displayed such powerful chemical action being allowed to run to waste.

"The next thing is to turn the brook through the pool a few minutes," suggested Ned. "We must wash it out as thoroughly as possible."

These measures having been duly taken, the young miners cut off the water again and allowed the pool to drain.

The result was precisely what they had anticipated.

A sort of mud had been produced by the combustion of the quartz, but this residue was so light that nine-tenths of it had been carried off with the flowing water, and only a thin deposit of sediment remained at the bottom of the pool.

And all this sediment was a spangle of glittering gold!

There were flakes and splinters of the precious metal of all possible shapes and in all possible dimensions, from the size of a pinhead to a pea, with here and there a veritable nugget, precisely as it had been cast in the rock, and also a deposit of "dust" which could be washed clean of all sediment with very little labor, comparatively speaking.

In a word, all the gold in the quartz had been set free and precipitated, while the rock itself had been completely disintegrated and resolved into its primitive elements!

Almost holding their breath, the young miners gazed as if fascinated, and well they might.

What visions of wealth passed before them!

They knew where the corrosive alkaloid—the principal agent in the wonderful process they had discovered—could be obtained by thousands and millions of tons, or in quantities sufficient to supply all the mines in the world!

No more need of ponderous machinery and costly plants!

By a simple chemical process, as simple as slacking lime, they could detach the gold from all the quartz that could be furnished them, and at a merely nominal cost!

They were still under the spell their success had cast upon them, when the clatter of a horse's hoofs fell upon their hearing, causing them to start to their feet in alarm for the safety of their precious secret.

"Can Harewood have returned?" asked Ned. "No. He would hardly come alone."

They concealed themselves behind the pile of quartz mentioned, and which had already covered their horses, and watched and listened.

The horseman continued to approach, and soon came to a halt at one of the entrances of the deserted mine, leaping lightly to the ground.

The principal fact about him was that he carried a basket on his arm which was evidently filled with provisions, as a bottle or two and a loaf of bread were visible.

With a single swift glance around him, the new-comer hitched his horse and took his way at a smart pace into a gallery leading to the depths of the mine.

"Ah, that looks as if there were a prisoner in the mine," suggested Ned. "Let's follow the fellow!"

They seized their rifles and suited their actions to the word!

CHAPTER XVI.

CLEARING UP ANOTHER MYSTERY.

THE gallery of which we have spoken formed the main artery of the deserted mine—the one in which nearly all other openings and passages took their rise, and through which they were reached.

It was traversed by a long series of ladders, inclines, and plankings, and was full of turns and angles.

These latter characteristics were especially favorable to the young explorers, as they afforded constant facilities of concealment.

As Ned and Bob reached the entrance of this network of openings, they noticed that the unknown had paused at the top of a long ladder to light a lantern, and they saw by this circumstance that they would require something similar, if they essayed to track the solitary individual to his destination.

Fortunately Bob was ready for the emergency.

The man had no sooner begun his descent of the ladder, with his lantern in one hand and his basket of provisions on the arm thus employed—leaving the other hand and arm for use in supporting himself—than Bob produced his coiled tallow torch and lighted it, leading the way in pursuit, after first motioning Demon to sit down just where he was and await his return.

Reaching the head of the ladder, with their light concealed in Bob's hat, the young explorers waited until the unknown had traversed a series of plankings and turned an angle, vanishing from view, and then they resumed progress.

"Of course we can follow him without the least difficulty whether we keep him in view or not," whispered Bob, as he reached the foot of the ladder.

"How so?"

"By the tracks he is leaving behind him, and has left, with his companions, for months past, or longer," explained Bob. "See here."

He held his light down to within a few inches of the plank under him.

There was no need to say more.

The track along the plank was as readily visible as a furrow in a field, the dust having been accumulating for many a month on every hand, and the track having been constantly in use, so that there was a great contrast between its aspect and that of the unbroken surfaces beside it.

"You're quite right," returned Ned, "but we'll none the less keep an eye on him."

They pushed on as rapidly as possible, and at the end of the plankings again caught a view of their man, who was hurrying along a lengthy lateral opening.

Here, too, the tracks of the unknown would have afforded a perfect clew to the direction he had taken, even if all other evidence had been lacking.

"Strange how careless folks can be," whispered Ned, with a smile. "They've been in and out here until they've left a route as clearly defined as a buffalo wallow, and yet they'll be considerably taken aback to learn that any one can follow them."

The unknown had now vanished again, descending another ladder, and the boys made haste to traverse the passage leading to it, when they again saw their man, who was continuing his way with the same preoccupied haste with which he had entered the mine.

A thought struck Ned, as he descended this second ladder, and he hastened to communicate it to his comrade, after taking care to see that the unknown was getting on out of hearing.

"Among the many mysteries which the governor has requested us to clear up," he said, "one of the most important is that which concerns a miner named Gideon Dorsett. You recall the particulars, no doubt?"

"Yes, Ned. About a year ago, Mr. Dorsett made some promising discoveries, and wrote his wife to that effect, requesting her to come out here with their daughter, and saying that he would meet them at the nearest railway station upon their arrival. The mother and daughter came here accordingly, but Mr. Dorsett failed to keep his appointment to meet them, and from that day to this his wife and daughter have not received the least hint of his whereabouts."

"That's the case, briefly told," confirmed Ned, "and what is more likely than that some such case as this now awaits our attention?"

"Possibly it is the Dorsett affair itself which is now thrusting itself upon our notice," suggested Bob. "Evidently there is a prisoner in the mine, and why may he not be Gideon Dorsett?"

"Or else there has been a wonderful discovery of gold in some of the old excavations, and the discoverer is keeping very still about it."

While exchanging these remarks, the young explorers had been keeping the unknown in view, apprehending every moment that he might discover their presence, as he would have done at times by simply looking behind him.

But they had noticed that he seemed in a great hurry, careless and unguarded—circumstances quite sufficient in themselves to warrant all the risk our heroes were taking.

They had also noticed that his echoing footsteps readily covered the noise made by their own, and that the various descents and irregularities of the route afforded hiding-places at almost every step—the more especially as the most of them were wrapped in profound gloom—and they did not hesitate to take their chances.

Besides, they were ready for anything, even for the detection of their presence.

"If he does see us, so much the worse for him," said Ned. "We'll close in upon him without ceremony, while he is waiting to see if we are not some of his own people, and take him prisoner."

Fortunately the unknown was too preoccupied, as well as too unsuspicious of human presence, to put any difficulties in the way of his shadowers, holding to his course steadily until he had reached one of the most distant and inaccessible retreats the whole mine had to offer.

And here a strange scene was presented, not merely to the unknown, but also to the young explorers following so closely behind him.

A space as wide and high as a large room had been left here by the removal of ore, and this space was lighted by a pendent lamp of such capacity as to reveal every portion of it.

At the extreme end was a small opening about the size of a prison cell, to which had been fitted an iron grating in the shape of a door.

Behind this door, and clinging to it, his wild eyes and pale features showing vividly from behind the bars, stood a man—a prisoner.

A few yards in front of him, upon a rude bed, reclined a gray-haired man, wrapped up in skins and blankets.

Against an adjacent wall stood a table containing dishes and provisions, and above this was a series of shelves, upon one of which were weapons of various kinds including revolvers.

A fire had been burning at some time in the center of the apartment—if we may call it such—but only a few charred embers remained.

"Awake already, Goff?" greeted the new-comer, as he placed his basket on the table.

"You'd think so, I reckon, if you had been here a few minutes ago and heard Jake Harewood lay down the law to me!" answered Goff, testily. "He's afraid we're too careless about the prisoner, and hereafter we're to keep watch by night as well as by day, one of us remaining awake while the other sleeps!"

"That's all the same to me, Goff—so long as they pay accordingly," declared the new-comer, dropping into a chair. "What did Jake say on this head?"

"Nothing at all, Baldy. I suppose he thinks we're well enough paid already!"

The listeners comprehended.

These two men, Goff and Baldy, were employed by Jake Harewood to watch and guard the prisoner.

Jake had just paid the mine a visit. This visit could only have been occasioned by the presence in the neighborhood of the young detectives.

Hence the prisoner was likely to be one of the missing men for whom they were looking, and why not Gideon Dorsett?

Such was the way in which our heroes had learned to reason!

"Well, all I need say is this," growled Baldy.

"If Jake & Co. want me to hump in this line, they'll have to increase the pay!"

"Me, too," returned Goff. "If they can force the prisoner to talk, they expect to get millions! Why should we burrow here for nothing? Let's strike for ten dollars a day, in addition to our keep!"

"They can get men for less, perhaps."

"But none that'll keep the secret—none that are safe! If some folks were in our place, they'd run the prisoner out to some new trap, and secure his secret all to themselves!"

"But he says his secret shall perish with him," remarked Baldy, "and the probabilities are that such will be the case. I'd sooner have what we're getting now, Goff, than risk a dollar on him! Never saw such a man! How he can remain shut up in such a hole as this, month after month, when he could be free just by saying a few words, is more than I can comprehend!"

"Then I'll make the matter plain to you," interposed the prisoner. "If I were to tell what I know, my life wouldn't be worth a candle! Jake & Co., as you call them, would murder me within twenty-four hours after verifying my information!"

Goff and Baldy exchanged glances.

"I reckon you're right, old man," then said the former. "If your great secret is so valuable, they'd be willing to kill you twice over, if 'twere possible—once to keep all the benefits of the secret to themselves, and once to put it out of your power to tell it to anybody else!"

The prisoner sighed wearily, drawing up a chair and seating himself, with his glances still fixed upon his two jailers.

He was scarcely more than forty years of age, although his sufferings and privations had prematurely blanched his hair and beard, and caused him to look at least ten years older than he was.

But it was easy to see that he was a man of pure heart and life, a man filled with the noblest sentiments and aspirations, and one about whose integrity and uprightness there could never arise the least question.

That he was also the possessor of a dauntless courage was apparent in every line of his sensitive, finely-cut features.

"I'll tell you what you'd better do, old man," said Goff, after a pause, as he arose from the bed he had been utilizing and moved it into one corner of the opening. "It's clear enough, at the rate you're losing heart and flesh, that you'll soon die, and the best thing you can do is to tell us—Baldy and me—where that wonderful gold-mine is!"

A sarcastic look traversed the face of the prisoner at this cool proposition.

"After what I've seen of you," he replied, "I think you're about the last couple I should choose for my heirs! Once in possession of my secret, you would kill me! That much I know by what I have learned of your characters while listening to your conversations!"

The frankness of these declarations seemed to cut the two jailers to the quick.

"Better be careful what you say," growled Goff, angrily. "It's in our power to cut off your bread and water, and it wouldn't take many speeches of that sort to induce us to do it!"

The sarcastic look on the prisoner's face deepened to a scornful sneer.

"I don't fear you," he replied. "Jake Harewood looks after you closely enough to prevent you from treating me in any such fashion as suggested. He seems to have taken your measure, or he would not have carried off the key of this dungeon, so as to place it wholly out of your power to release me!"

He sighed again, drawing an old blanket around his shoulders, with a shiver, as if the cold and dampness of this underground abode pierced his thin frame, and then added:

"If these little matters have been duly comprehended, I'll thank you to let me have my breakfast."

"All right," returned Baldy, as he sprung to his feet. "My ride has given me a keen appetite, and in serving you I shall for once serve myself, Mr. Dorsett!"

"Mr. Dorsett!"

How that name echoed in the souls of Ned and Bob, as they exchanged glances, amid the shadows where they had halted, after extinguishing their torch and following Baldy into the very presence of the prisoner!

The mere mention of his name was enough to establish his identity.

He was indeed the long-missing miner—the father of Olla Dorsett, and the husband of the lady Harrold Dabshaw had thrust out into the great forest to die.

"But perhaps Jake didn't tell you what had started him this way so early in the morning?" resumed Baldy, as he set about laying a fire upon the embers we have mentioned.

"No, he didn't," returned Goff. "But I readily saw that he was flurried about something."

"I'll tell you what ailed him," said Baldy. "I hurried back as fast as I could to post you. It seems that a couple of detectives have been at the 'Sinner's Rest,' with a dog that talks just

like any man, and have arrested Hy Gunnel and sent him to prison."

"You don't mean it!"

"Yes, sir! They've hived Gunnel at last, as I always knew they would, ever since he grew so careless as to show himself almost every evening at the 'Rest.' Constable Wilkins has carted him off to jail, and he'll go up aloft just as soon as they can try him."

"So much for his being a fool!" commented Goff. "But what about the dog that talks?"

"Oh, that is simply that one of the young detectives is a ventriloquist, and that the dog has been trained to do certain tricks, such as walking on his hind legs, pointing with his forepaw, and so forth."

He proceeded to give a very good account of the occurrences which had taken place at the Miners' Rest on the previous evening, without remarking how eagerly and excitedly the prisoner was listening to every word he was saying.

"But who and what are these two detectives?" asked Goff, as he set about utilizing the fire Baldy had kindled.

"Nobody knows," replied the latter. "But it's clear enough that they've been sent into the Big Horn region to arrest all such chaps as Gunnel, and perhaps ferret out all such mysteries as this Dorsett business."

"In that case they may turn up here," said Goff, with a sudden swift glance around.

"That's evidently Harewood's view of the situation," observed Baldy, "and I must say that we had better keep wide awake. We're hardly careful enough. One of us ought to be on guard all the time, rifle in hand. It's really a mistake for us both to be busy with breakfast, with our rifles and revolvers on the shelf, for we'd be completely at the mercy of those two detectives if they were to suddenly advance from that darkness yonder, getting the drop on us, and say—"

"Surrender, both of you, or we'll blow your heads off!" was the command from Ned Wharton, which suddenly interrupted Baldy's observations.

CHAPTER XVII.

A STRANGE DELIVERANCE.

At sight of the intruders, the two jailers of Gideon Dorsett stood as if paralyzed, the mouth of Baldy remaining open, his under-jaw fallen as in death.

Goff stood with a frying-pan in one hand and a piece of beef in the other, in the very attitude in which the unexpected invasion had found him.

Both realized at a glance that the situation was exactly as Baldy had stated.

The intruders had the drop upon them.

"You needn't waste that steak," resumed Ned, advancing more into the light, with his rifle leveled at Goff's head. "Put the steak into the pan and set the pan on the fire—so! Now lie down at full length upon your tenderest side and await orders."

Goff complied without hesitation, as without remark, comprehending clearly the nature of the attention concentrated upon him.

"You can bind him securely, Bob," pursued Ned, as he brought his rifle to bear upon Baldy. "I can cover both."

The couple were promptly bound in a thorough as well as artistic fashion.

"Perhaps there is no occasion to gag them," said Bob, as he proceeded to seat his prisoners in a couple of chairs. "We may desire to ask them some questions."

"We can gag them when they get noisy, or when their calls are likely to work us an injury," returned Ned. "For the present, we can leave them the use of their tongues. What is your name, my man?"

The question was addressed to Goff.

"Goff Hinckley," was the answer.

"And you, sir?" pursued Ned, as he gave his attention to the steak in the frying-pan.

"Baldy Gardner."

"A nice lot. Who's the prisoner, Mr. Hinckley?"

"His name is Gideon Dorsett."

"By whose orders are you acting?"

"By Jake Harewood's."

"So far, good! I see you are disposed to tell the truth. What you say agrees with what we overheard. Has Jake Harewood any partners?"

"Yes, his brother-in-law, Ben Crump."

"Who else?"

"A man of whom we've heard often enough, but never seen—Harrold Dabshaw."

"Harrold Dabshaw?"

Ned recoiled as excitedly as if a mine had been exploded beside him.

"Who?" he cried.

Goff Hinckley repeated the name.

There was no mistake about it.

The name was indeed that of the miner mentioned in the letter of his father which had reached him so strangely in the mail-bag of Peter Darrell after so many years of waiting.

How startled Ned was to bear this name announced in such an unexpected manner, will readily be imagined.

"Strange, is it not, Bob?" he said.

"It is indeed. I was never more astonished."

"Since that name first came to my notice," continued Ned, "it has been constantly in my thoughts. How many times I have asked myself if we shall ever encounter the man who bears it."

"Things look that way now. It is certainly a great point gained to know that such a man is still in the land of the living."

Ned again turned to Goff.

"You've never seen this Dabshaw, you say?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know where he lives?"

Goff shook his head.

"Then how am I to find him?"

"I know of only one way, and that is to ask Jake Harewood or Ben Crump."

Ned reflected a few moments, asking himself in what way he could get information upon this subject from the men in question.

"Perhaps some one in Big Horn City may know the whereabouts of this man," he then said in a low whisper to Bob. "We'll try Doctor Barker, Constable Wilkins, and all the rest."

Once more he turned to the prisoners.

"Now, my men," he said, "we want you to keep very still and quiet, and leave us to make the acquaintance of Mr. Dorsett in our own fashion, and to take our time about it. You understand me?"

"Perfectly," answered Goff.

"We'll not interrupt you," said Baldy.

Ned understood them.

They wanted to hear what the new-comers would have to say to their prisoner.

Turning toward the dungeon, the young explorers advanced in that direction, saluting the prisoner with visible sympathy and respect.

"You know already who I am, then?" asked Dorsett, as he shook hands heartily with Ned and his companion.

"Yes, sir," answered Ned, in a whisper too low to reach the listening ears. "Your wife has written many a letter to the governor and other influential parties, during the last year, asking to have renewed efforts made to solve the mystery of your strange disappearance."

"My dear wife! She still lives, then? Thank Heaven!" cried the prisoner. "Do you know where she is?"

"Her letters are dated at Newberry, the nearest post-office, but I understood that she is a long distance away, in some out-of-the-way place, where she is living as a housekeeper to some sort of an invalid or hermit."

"And my daughter?"

"She was well and with her mother at the latest accounts—say within a month or two," answered Ned. "I remember her name—Olla! It was her letter that caused the governor to give us very especial instructions to search for you. But I hasten to add, Mr. Dorsett, that it is rather by our good luck than by our cunning that we have found you!"

"Do you know why I am here?"

"Yes, sir. Besides listening to the conversation which has just taken place between these two men, we have other information, including that contained in the last letter you sent Mrs. Dorsett. Harewood and his associates are trying to make you tell where you found certain gold. Am I right?"

"Perfectly. These villains robbed me of over two hundred pounds of gold, and then shut me up here to force me to tell them where I got it. They realized that I had found a wonderful mine—as indeed I have," and he lowered his voice to a whisper. "If you can release me from this place," he added, "I shall take pleasure in sharing my secret with you. But why that snile?"

"We share your secret already, sir," replied Ned, his smile deepening.

"Truly?" gasped Dorsett.

"Actually and truly!" affirmed Ned. "My comrade and I were driven off into the depths of an unknown wilderness by some prowling Crows, and came across a pool which we called the Alkali Sink—"

The prisoner nodded understandingly.

"Then to a brook at the bottom of a deep ravine, the bed of which brook is a band of gold!"

"Ah, yes!"

"And then up this brook to a large circular excavation which we called *The Golden Jar*!"

"Merciful heavens!"

"And so on to the woodless plateau where you erected a rude shelter and took out several barrels of the mysterious corrosive!"

The prisoner gasped for breath, his face flushing hotly, his limbs trembling beneath him.

"I see that you have the secret," he murmured. "But I will not complain. You are brave, noble young fellows, as I can see at a glance, and I shall be glad to have your assistance in gathering that gold, if I can only get out of this horrible dungeon!"

"Your release is the first point to be attended to," returned Ned, as he removed the frying-pan from the fire. "These men haven't the key of this door?"

"No. Harewood has taken it away with him."

The boys examined the lock and bolt.

"It's a very difficult matter to reach you without the key," said Ned. "Even if we had sledge-hammers, it would take us a long time to effect an entrance. What are we to do, Bob?"

The two consulted a minute or two, but without reaching any practical result.

To set the prisoner free by violence would at the best be a task of hours, as no suitable tools were at hand.

But suddenly Bob started, a flash of joy overspreading his face.

"I have it!" he cried, with a swift glance around. "Wait!"

He seized the lantern which had lighted Baldy into the place, and which was still burning, and dashed away as if possessed in the direction from which he had come.

It seemed an hour before he returned, although he could not have been absent five minutes, but a glance at the bag on his shoulder explained his absence.

"Ah, the corrosive!" said Ned. "I suppose you tried it, Mr. Dorsett—that substance you dug out at the spot indicated?"

"I did. I disintegrated many tons of quartz with it. And you?"

"We've simply given it a good trial, but that was enough to show just what can be done with it."

He followed a few moments with his glances the movements of Bob, who had placed the bag on the floor, and was pouring some water, and then asked:

"What's your idea, old fellow?"

"Why, if the corrosive is good for ore," returned Bob, in a guarded whisper, "it is equally good for ordinary stone. Not being able to release Mr. Dorsett in the regular way, the key being with Harewood, we will have to release him by a very singular and irregular process. In a word, the corrosive must eat him out!"

Ned thrilled with joy, comprehending the whole matter.

"Ah, that is so!" he cried. "With that corrosive alkaloid in our hands, we're the masters of the situation."

"What do you propose to do?" asked Dorsett, wondering alike at the proceedings of the boys and at their sudden excitement.

"We propose to get you out of that hole, sir, and very quickly, that's all," answered Ned, his face glowing with joyous enthusiasm. "Do not be worried. Do not be impatient. We know just what we are about, and will have you at liberty in ten minutes. You've barely time to take a bite of breakfast, and we shall open this iron door and restore you to freedom!"

He proceeded to hand the bewildered prisoner such things to eat as the table and basket afforded, including the beefsteak he had cooked, and then gave his attention to the task with which Bob was already so busy.

"I have found just what I want—a pail with a spout," said Bob, "and am already stirring up a solution in it, as you see. Suppose you find a bench or a bit of ladder—anything that will add to your height three or four feet, or the distance of that lock from the floor."

Ned comprehended, and had soon found just what he wanted—a small table to put upon the big one—and these he placed in the desired position at the distance of a yard from the door of the dungeon.

"There! just in time," said Bob, as he drew near with the pail containing a couple of gallons of the solution he had prepared. "Please hand this fiery dose up to me!"

He sprang lightly upon the tables, gaining the one uppermost, and Ned handed the pail to him.

"You had better retreat as far as you can, Mr. Dorsett," advised Bob, "so that you will not get splattered and burned."

The prisoner complied wonderingly with the suggestion.

"You'll have to be careful, or you'll get burned yourself, Bob," said Ned. "Perhaps I can drive away the smoke and steam from your face by raising a current of air with my hat!"

"You can at least try, Ned. All ready. Here she goes!"

Placing the end of the spout of which he had spoken against and upon the massive stone in which the bolt of the dungeon's lock was imbedded, he moistened it gently with the contents of the pail.

Immediately was heard a hissing and sputtering, as of something burning, and at the same moment arose from the surface of the stone in question a cloud of whitish smoke.

"Good! It acts like a charm!" exclaimed Bob.

"As I foresaw it would, when I realized what you were doing!" avowed Ned.

"In Heaven's name, my young friends," cried the prisoner, as the sputtering and hissing continued, and the dungeon began filling with the whitish smoke which almost shut the boys out from his view, "what are you doing?"

"Simply burning you out, sir!" replied Bob.

As to Goff and Baldy, they gazed in scared amazement, scarcely venturing to breathe, and not daring to speak.

Advancing the spout of his pail, as fast as the rock disappeared before it, and continuing to pour the solution upon the stone he desired to remove, Bob persisted in the task he had undertaken, despite the disagreeable cloud in which he was more or less enveloped.

"Shall I not take a turn at it?" demanded Ned, after carefully noting results.

"Not yet. How is it working?"

"Gloriously! The stone is being cut away as if it were sand!"

"Give the door a shake!"

Ned complied, uttering a cry of joy as he saw that it yielded.

"Keep pouring!" he cried, continuing to shake the barrier. "The sticker is being loosened! Try to pour at the point where the bolt comes in contact with the stone! That's it! A moment more—Ha! there she is!"

And with another fierce shake or two he drew the door wide open!

"Thank Heaven!" came from Dorsett again, in a barely audible whisper, so great was his joy and excitement. "What a strange deliverance! Saved! saved!"

He came staggering out of the dungeon, as Ned took the pail and Bob leaped down from the table, and the next instant lay half fainting in their arms.

"No weakness now, sir," cried Ned, embracing the rescued man fervently. "We have much to do! These rogues, who have so long been your jailers," and he glanced at Goff and Baldy, who sat as if paralyzed—"they must take the place you have vacated!"

It was in vain that the ruffians protested.

"In with them!" cried Ned. "It is high time to give them a taste of their own medicine!"

The couple were hustled into the dungeon, with scant ceremony.

"There's one comfort," cried Goff, angrily, finding his voice at last. "You cannot lock us up!"

"We can at least barricade you with the fragments of quartz lying around here," returned Ned. "Lively, Bob! We'll pin 'em in securely!"

It took the boys but a few moments to place against the iron door such a quantity of stone and ore as to have prevented a dozen men from pushing it open.

"There you are, my fine fellows," then exclaimed Ned, jubilantly. "We leave you to your fate. Come, Mr. Dorsett!"

Supporting the rescued miner very carefully between them, the two young heroes secured their weapons and took their way toward the entrance of the mine, lighting their way with Baldy's lantern.

"Such joy! such relief!" murmured Dorsett, leaning upon the stout shoulders of his new friends. "Heaven has sent you to me. I live again. I shall see again my dear wife and daughter. Ah! what's that?"

It was the bark of Demon which had suddenly come reverberating along the aisles and corridors of the mine.

A furious barking, as if the dog were in trouble, and conveying a warning to his master.

"It's our dog," replied Ned, with a sudden flush of excitement. "But his barking means trouble for us. Perhaps Harewood has returned with assistance. As lively as you can, Mr. Dorsett. The sooner we are out of the mine the better."

The trio continued to push forward, becoming more and more anxious, the furious barking of Demon being continued, and ere long, turning an angle, they came upon a sight which arrested their footsteps.

In the act of descending the second ladder were a number of men who were lighting themselves with lanterns, and at their head were Jake Harewood and Ben Crump.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN IMPORTANT EXPEDITION.

AT seeing their retreat from the deserted mine intercepted, Ned and Bob looked sharply around for a hiding-place, and were so fortunate as to find it.

The surroundings to which we have so often alluded now stood them in good stead, a lateral niche in the irregular excavations of the mine affording them an instant eclipse.

Availing themselves of this resource, they waited for the new-comers to pass on their way, Ned concealing the lantern under his coat.

"Yes; they were evidently bound this way, when I met them," Harewood was saying to his companions, who were now seen to include old Harkness, making three in all, "and I instantly jumped to the conclusion that they intended to release the prisoner. That's why I hastened to find you and come back. I only hope we're in time!"

"Pity you didn't see 'em in time to hide behind some rock and get the drop on 'em!" muttered Ben Crump, with an imprecation.

"Yes, it's a pity. I'd kill 'em at sight, if I had a chance. We shall not be able to draw a long breath until we've put an end to their prowling about in this fashion. If we look sharp, we may scoop 'em yet. Should we fail

to do so, it's more than possible that they'll scoop us! Hy Gunnel is already in their hands, and if he should tell all he knows—"

The rest was lost in the distance.

"Such being their sentiments," whispered Ned, as he looked after the murderous trio, "we needn't be too particular in our further dealings with them. If they should get in our way again, let 'em look out."

Loud cries of alarm came from Baldy and Goff at this moment, showing that they had divined or discovered the approach of assistance.

"They'll soon tell their story," said Ned, "and be released, and then they'll all pursue us. I don't like to play the fox to that kind of dog. My impression is that Harewood will soon come tumbling out of that hole to see which way we have gone or keep us under notice."

"'Twould be natural," said Bob.

"Should he do so," pursued Ned, "we could first capture him hereabouts, and then do as much for his companions. Hark!"

The uproar at the scene of their latest operations had increased. The voice of Harewood was heard echoing through the passages of the mine, as he excitedly gave orders.

"Yes, he's coming," added Ned. "We'll intercept him. This way, Mr. Dorsett."

He uncovered his lantern, handing it to Dorsett, and motioned him to lead the way back into the gallery along which they had come.

This was instantly done.

"Simply stand where you are, Mr. Dorsett, and give us as much light as possible," enjoined Ned. "We'll attend to the rest."

While speaking, he had planted himself, rifle in hand, in a good position to command the gallery and Bob had done likewise.

These dispositions had scarcely been taken when Harewood was heard thundering along the gallery lighting himself with a lantern.

"Released! just gone! hardly out of the mine!" he was crying, in furious excitement. "I must see where—"

Here he suddenly interrupted himself, his gaze encountering the released prisoner.

"Ah! there you are!" he yelled, coming to a halt.

"Yes, and there you are, Jake Harewood!" supplemented Ned, as he laid the muzzle of his rifle against the right ear of the startled man.

"Have the goodness to sit down just where you are, and keep very still, or the Miner's Rest will soon be in need of a new landlord!"

The command being enforced by a prod in the ribs from the muzzle of Bob's rifle, Harewood felt that he would be rashly tempting fate to permit himself a single word of remonstrance.

He accordingly sat down, and was soon as helpless and harmless as a stout rope and a gag could make him.

"Just keep an eye on him, and wait for us a moment, Mr. Dorsett," suggested Ned. "Having him in our hands, we have all the more reason to dislike a too rapid pursuit, and can do no less than see what Ben Crump is doing."

The young explorers glided away, rifles in hand, and soon vanished from the view of Dorsett and the prisoner.

In less than a minute, in fact, they were looking into the opening they had so recently quitted.

Baldy and Goff were explaining their situation, both at once, with such volubility that it would have been difficult for a third party to get in a word edgewise, while Ben Crump and old Harkness, stripped to their work, and with their rifles standing against the wall, were removing the pieces of ore and stone from the door of the dungeon as fast as they could.

"Excuse me," suddenly said Ned.

Both Crump and Harkness dropped the pieces of ore they had been in the act of removing, and faced about, looking in the direction from which that quiet remark had proceeded.

As they could have reasonably expected, each found himself looking into the barrel of a rifle.

"Excuse me," repeated Ned. "It's a pity you should be fatiguing yourselves with such labors. Sit down and rest—do!"

There was a significance about his tones which both men could appreciate.

They knew that a single movement of any sort, other than that prescribed, would be their last, and they hastened to comply with the injunction.

Both were instantly secured, in the best style of our heroes, while Baldy and Goff looked on in horrified silence.

"There! You'll see how much nicer it is to look on, while we effect an entrance into that dungeon," resumed Ned. "I'm afraid you're tenderfoots in this line of business!"

The boys moved the ore out of the way rapidly, and in less than a minute had again opened the door of the dungeon, the four prisoners contemplating them with uneasy amazement.

"We cannot think of separating four such congenial spirits," resumed Ned, as he seized Ben Crump and deposited him in the dungeon, while Bob rendered the same service to Harkness. "If all the mad-dogs in the world should be gathered into this mine within the next twenty-four hours, they would not be able to bite you!"

Ben Crump opened his mouth to make some

response, but he seemed to realize in time that language was all too cold and meaningless for the occasion, and wisely held his peace, as did his companions in misfortune.

In a few minutes the door of the dungeon had been duly barricaded anew with ore and stone, and the boys seized their rifles and vanished, returning to Harewood and Dorsett.

"We've left them all comfortable," reported Ned to Dorsett, with a smile. "We can now go our ways in peace."

"Of course you'll take this man with you?" queried Dorsett, indicating Harewood.

"Of course. If he don't pass the remainder of his days in prison, if only on account of his treatment of you, Mr. Dorsett, you may set me down as a false prophet!"

A look of awful consternation passed over the features of the prisoner.

He signified by half-frantic gestures that he desired to speak.

His mouth was accordingly set free, after a caution not to abuse the privilege thus given him.

"What I want to say, gentlemen, is this," began Harewood, his voice trembling. "There's no denying that you've turned the tables upon me. The money we took from Dorsett has never been divided. I can take you to the spot where it is buried."

"And what then?" asked Ned.

"Why, I'll give it all up if you will give me my freedom."

A terrible look came into Ned Whartons' steel-blue eyes.

"Is that all you'll do?" he asked. "You'll return the money stolen! But what about the year of imprisonment and torture Mr. Dorsett has suffered at your hands?"

"I—I will give him the 'Miner's Rest' as an indemnity—the house and furniture, the bar-room and all in it."

Another look from Ned told him how little was thought of his offers.

"I—I'll get Ben Crump and my father to give you as much more!" he hastened to declare, a cold perspiration appearing on his forehead, and his whole frame trembling with terror. "We'll all do the right thing—in any way you may order."

"You'd even give us that mysterious toll-gate, I suppose, to which we were conducted by your sister?"

"Yes, I would!"

"And probably tell us how many unfortunate miners and other travelers have been murdered there since the trap was set?" suggested Ned, his eyes blazing. "Will you go so far as to tell us all you know about your father and sister, Ben Crump and all the rest?"

"Yes—yes! I'll make a full confession."

"Very well, sir. Now hear my answer, Jake Harewood," returned Ned. "The gold you offer us is of no more account than a solitary nickel. We know where we can find gold by the ton. All the gold in the Big Horn Valley—or all the gold in the world, for that matter—would not tempt us to release you. As to any confession you can make, we would not snap our fingers to have it. What we don't know about your tribe already, including the mysteries of that toll-gate, we are in a fair way to discover, and can discover, without the least assistance from you. This is my answer to your proposition, and this is all I have to say to you."

The gag was replaced in the prisoner's mouth, and in another moment he was being borne along the gallery by Bob and Ned toward the entrance.

Dorsett was so very weak that he, in his turn, had to be helped up the ladders, but his rescuers were as stalwart as active, and in due course he found himself looking out of the entrance of the gallery into the light of day.

With what joy he drew in a long breath of the fresh air of the morning need not be stated.

It was almost like passing from death to life.

Demon expressed in his usual fashion his delight and relief at seeing his master again—simply with two or three stately wags of his tail—and then led the way toward the spot where the young heroes had left their horses.

"What about our gold?" asked Bob, as the little party neared the spot where they had tested their corrosive alkaloid so successfully.

"We shall have to sprinkle a little dirt upon it and leave it for the present," was the answer.

The measure was duly taken without the knowledge of Harewood, who remained under Dorsett's care while our heroes were busy with the task, and then Dorsett mounted Ben Crump's horse, while Harewood was placed upon his own, which was stoutly attached to both Ned's and Bob's, so as to afford the prisoner no chance whatever of making his escape.

In this way they took their way down the hills to Big Horn City, fetching up by a back way across the fields at the house of Constable Wilkins.

The constable had just returned from his trip of the previous night, but he was delighted to take charge of the new prisoner, and none the less so because Harewood had long been nag-

ging him on his own account, as well as in relation to Hy Gunnel.

"Of course I'll take him before Justice Abbott, and have him duly committed for highway robbery, sequestration, and so on, upon Mr. Dorsett's testimony," said the constable, when Ned had duly enlightened him in regard to the situation of affairs. "To be sure of holding him, we'll have him committed without bail!"

"That's the course to take," said Ned. "Meanwhile, if he is willing to keep a civil tongue in his head, I see no necessity of keeping that gag in his mouth, since it is calculated to attract unnecessary attention."

"You hear, Harewood?" queried Wilkins, turning to the prisoner. "I act upon the deputy's suggestion, but with the understanding that you will respect our kindness."

The gag having been removed from Harewood's mouth, he hastened to signify that he desired to say a word, privately, to his captors.

They drew near accordingly.

"Baldly was telling me," said Harewood, addressing himself particularly to Ned, "that you desire to know the whereabouts of a certain Harrold Dabshaw!"

"Quite correct," returned Ned. "I do indeed desire to know the whereabouts of the said Dabshaw, and Goff suggested that you could probably give me this information!"

"I can indeed," affirmed Harewood, his tones tremulous with eagerness and excitement.

"And will you?"

"I will, under certain conditions!"

"Name them."

"The first is, that you will bear in mind the kindness I am doing you, and be as easy with me as you can when I am brought to trial."

"This I agree to."

"The second condition is, that you will punish Dabshaw as the principal in all this Dorsett business, for such he really is."

"You can depend upon this also."

"And finally I want you to start at once for Dabshaw's, without bringing me before Justice Abbott. In this way you will spare me the humiliation of being stared at by my neighbors."

Ned reflected a few moments, asking Bob and Dorsett, as well as himself, if there were anything suspicious about this final request.

"Of course you have ample warrant to deal with me without the aid of Justice Abbott," added Harewood. "Besides, I wish to have with you a definite understanding before I am taken to court. Accede to these terms, sir, and I am ready to guide you to Dabshaw's immediately. Refuse, and I shall furnish no information whatever about him!"

"Perhaps I can find him without your aid," said Ned, a little stiffly.

"No, sir. No one knows anything about him. Your Constable Wilkins, for instance, has never so much as heard his name until this moment!"

Ned consulted Wilkins, and found that his position had been accurately stated.

"Of course the fellow means to lead us into some trap, or to trick us in some way—that's clear enough," said Ned to Bob. "But he could do that just as well after being arraigned as before. Upon the whole, I am inclined to leave you at Doctor Barker's, to pursue this quest for Dabshaw independently, while I take Wilkins and Mr. Dorsett, and see where the prisoner will lead us."

Bob approved of this course, and in a few minutes more Ned and Dorsett were riding out of Big Horn City, with Jake Harewood between them, while Constable Wilkins brought up the rear.

"When shall we be at Dabshaw's, Harewood?" asked Ned, settling himself into the saddle.

"It's a matter of six or seven hours, by the short cut I shall take," answered Jake, and then he looked down, with a very strange gleam in his eyes.

CHAPTER XIX.

"THE KING OF GRIZZLIES."

ON and on went Mrs. Dorsett, in the great solitude in which we left her—on and on!

She scarcely heeded the loneliness and wildness of her surroundings, so keenly was she preoccupied with the necessity and importance of making her way back to Olla at the earliest possible moment.

She had entered upon this task with a vague idea that a few hours would suffice for its execution.

Sustained and cheered by this hope, she did not quite realize at first the horrors of her situation.

As weak and pain-racked as she had been for months, she remained for a long time quite oblivious of the bodily fatigue which so rapidly grew upon her.

Now and then, when the barking of the distant wolves was heard with peculiar distinctness, as if they were coming nearer, she picked out a tree to serve her as a place of

refuge, in case of necessity, and stood near it, watching and listening, until the danger was past.

Her mind was fully made up not to resort to this measure if she could help it.

Her time was too precious.

She desired to keep moving!

On a single occasion she did indeed mount to the perch she had chosen, not merely because the barking of the wolves had sounded so near as to alarm her, but also because she desired to assure herself that she was not overrating her actual forces.

But fortunately she was spared the necessity of making a long stay in this disagreeable situation.

Oh! how weary she grew as the night wore on, but yet she would not pause in those lone, dismal wanderings.

Her one thought was to get back to Olla.

The darkness of the night was variable, clouds coming and going, and variable also was the complexion of the forest, certain portions of it being almost exclusively composed of pines and other evergreens, and others entirely of maple and oak and other trees less heavily leaved.

More than once the wanderer came to ledges of rocks she could not easily climb, to thickets she could not readily penetrate, or to streams she could not cross without wading, but she did not allow anything of the sort to come between her and her purpose to get back to Olla as soon as possible.

Again and again she was obliged to retrace her steps a longer or shorter distance to turn insurmountable obstructions, and many a time did she traverse such dark places that she was forced to feel her way constantly with her hands and feet, lest she should tumble to her death down some yawning declivity.

Few ladies have ever passed such a night of toil and suffering as was now her lot.

She was, of course, obliged to pause repeatedly to rest, and as often as she did so she was obliged to battle with the profound sense of weariness which manifested itself and threatened to overcome her.

Strange situation!

She did not dare go to sleep on the ground lest a wolf should eat her, and she did not care go to sleep in a tree lest she should fall and break a limb, or even suffer a worse injury.

At times, when so hard pressed by her sense of fatigue that she could hardly put one foot before the other, she regretted exceedingly that she had not secured the rope with which Harrold Dabshaw had bound her, as it would have enabled her to lash herself in the top of some tree in such a way as to prevent her from falling out.

The long hours of the night were at length worn away, and the light of a new day began breaking in the east, eventually developing into a bright and sunny morning.

So far as the weather was concerned, Mrs. Dorsett had been favored, and for this she was thankful.

Hating at a brook to quench her thirst, she became conscious of a new peril—the possibility, the extreme probability, even, that she would perish of hunger before she could make her way out of that immense forest.

Another thought that sent a thrill through her entire being, was a conviction that she had already lost her way and was wandering at random!

The sun had not risen where she expected it to rise, but almost in the opposite direction!

In good truth, as she discovered later, she had been going directly away from Olla the whole night, and was already more than twenty miles from the spot where she had made her escape!

As she resumed progress, she became conscious that she had exhausted her forces.

She felt faint and weak, and a strange dizziness assailed her.

It was all she could do to keep her feet.

Her walk became uncertain and tottering.

At length she was forced to seat herself upon the trunk of a fallen tree, and cling to one of its branches for support.

She realized that she could go no further.

"This is to be the end," she murmured. "I must die here! There's not the least chance of making my way out of these dreadful solitudes! I shall never see Olla again."

For the first time since making her escape hope forsook her, and she burst into tears.

She had done all she could.

She must accept her fate.

How long she gave way to this gloomy depression she did not know, but she was at length aroused by a human voice.

Her first impression, naturally enough, was that her senses were deceiving her and that she was the sport of one of those illusions so often experienced by persons suffering from hunger and fatigue.

But she nevertheless summoned all her strength to her aid and looked around.

The voice again fell upon her hearing, as if to guide her glances, and she turned her gaze in the direction from which it proceeded.

What she saw was so extraordinary that she could only consider herself the sport of an illusion.

A tall, formidable-looking personage, clad in skins, and literally enveloped in a beard and a head of hair which had not been trimmed in many a long year, was stalking gravely toward her, occasionally addressing a remark or an ejaculation to his attendants.

These attendants were four enormous grizzly bears, which followed him as quietly as if they had been so many lambs.

From moment to moment one of the four would essay to take the lead of their strange conductor, but a word or a gesture sufficed to check this manifestation, and the offender would slink back to a distance of several rods behind his master.

Thus the extraordinary group drew near, the eyes of the bears seeming hardly less wild than those of the man, as their glances concentrated fixedly upon the face and form of Mrs. Dorsett.

How terrified she was will be understood without the telling.

She would have fled in dismay, but found herself unable to stir, so completely was she paralyzed by the terrific spectacle thus presented.

"Another phantom, no doubt!" exclaimed the strange unknown, when he advanced to within half a dozen rods of the spot where Mrs. Dorsett was seated. "Of course, it will vanish like all the rest. How much I've been tricked and cheated by this sort of thing! It does seem sometimes as if I should go crazy."

He came to an abrupt halt, extending his arms imperatively as a command for the bears to halt, which they instantly did.

"Presto, vanish!" he resumed, waving off Mrs. Dorsett as one would conjure a phantom. "Now I see you, and now I—Astorishing! What! You are still there? Glorious! perhaps she is a living woman, after all!"

Mrs. Dorsett comprehended. The man was as mad as any human being can be—totally disorganized in all his faculties and conceptions—as indeed he would have to be before he could become resigned to living in such an oppressive solitude, and with such creatures for his companions.

Clearly enough, too, he had been an occupant of this wilderness a long time, as was shown by his garb, as well as by his hair and beard.

But there was an innocent simplicity about the stranger which told her that his present mood was in no wise dangerous, and this conclusion was confirmed by his almost childish wonder and pleasure at her presence.

She saw, too, that he seemed to have the four grizzlies under perfect control, and realized that she had nothing now to fear from them.

He stirred anew in her heart. Perhaps this strange being could be of service to her, notwithstanding his madness.

"You—you are really a living woman?" he resumed, after staring at her a few moments in silence.

"Certainly," answered Mrs. Dorsett, as pleasantly as possible, as she quietly slipped off the trunk of the fallen tree, gaining her feet. "What should I be?"

"You wouldn't disappear if I should come nearer?"

"Of course not," and she approached him, calling a smile to her face and offering her hand. "Does that feel as if I were a phantom? I am glad to see you!"

"Sure enough! A living woman at last!" cried the madman, with a flush of delight. "Here's a new order o' things!" and he pressed the lady's hand to his lips, looking into her face with joyous admiration. "Art lost?"

"I am, sir," avowed Mrs. Dorsett.

"My case exactly," affirmed the unknown, with a grave smile. "I've been lost ever since the day when the whole surface of the earth was converted into a gloomy wood, in order to punish mankind for their sins! You must remember when there were great cities and houses and railways and ships, with countless numbers of men and women?"

"Oh, yes."

"Strange that all those things should have been blotted out in an instant, and that only a great forest should remain!" said the madman, sadly. "Strange that I should be the only man left living, even as you are probably the only woman! Just think what it is, madam, to be the last man!" and he sat down upon the fallen tree in gloomy grandeur, drawing around his emaciated form the immense coat of skins which formed his principal garment. "Little did I think when I was a boy that I should live to be the last man in the world!"

He shook his head dubiously from side to side two or three times, and then burst into tears—so real, so expressive of harrowing emotions, that Mrs. Dorsett felt her own eyes filling from sympathy.

"Perhaps there are still other people in the world—if we could only find them," she suggested, as gently as cleverly, desiring to turn his thoughts in the same direction her own had taken.

"Oh, no! I have looked for them for years, and have not found them! I have not even been able to get out of the forest! I know from these two circumstances that the worst has happened! The facts are all as I have stated! We are alone, my dear madam—alone, alone!"

Mrs. Dorsett thought it only too natural that the vagaries of the madman should have taken this turn, but she was determined to convince him that human beings could be found by looking for them, and she accordingly resumed:

"Perhaps I have been sent here to restore you to your friends, and it may also be that you will restore me to mine. I have a daughter—such a sweet girl—whom I saw only yesterday—and hence it is not too much to say that there is at least one other being in the world than ourselves!"

"True enough," declared the madman. "If you saw her yesterday, it is only reasonable to say that she can be found to-day."

"The very thing!" cried Mrs. Dorsett. "Shall we not look for her soon—when I get rested?"

"Most assuredly, if thou art convinced that she can be found."

"Oh! I know she can be. Meanwhile, are we not in danger of being devoured by these terrible bears? See! they are coming nearer."

The grizzlies had indeed resumed progress, sauntering up to within a few feet of the fallen tree.

"Oh, they're harmless as kittens," said the madman, patting the head of one of the monsters which had dropped upon its haunches at his feet. "It's necessary that I should anoint you—that's all."

"How anoint me?"

"I'll show you." The madman drew from his pocket a small wooden box, at sight of which the four grizzlies started as if they had been shot, retreating precipitately two or three rods.

"They know what's coming, you see," resumed the madman, with a chuckle. "I have here an ointment I have made from a weed which grows on the banks of a brook near my house."

"Ah! you have a house, sir?"

"Of course, I have. You shall see it later. But let me tell you about the ointment," and he opened the box, from which arose a most pungent and peculiar odor. "You see how distasteful it is to those fellows? I have only to hold the box toward them—so," and he suited the action to the word, "and away 'll they go."

It was even so! The bears sprung up abruptly, one or two of them growling, and trotted away at least ten rods before they again faced about and lay down upon the ground, with their eyes fixed upon the strange hermit.

"How wonderful!" cried Mrs. Dorsett.

"All I have to do, therefore," resumed the madman, "is to rub a little of this ointment on your sleeves and the skirt of your dress, and those chaps, as ugly as they look, will never dare come any nearer to you than they are now."

Mrs. Dorsett could readily believe this assertion, so very disagreeable was the odor in question.

Nevertheless, she very gladly endured it, for the sake of being able to dismiss all her apprehensions about the bears.

"Who are you, sir, if I may be so bold as to ask?" was her next inquiry.

The madman did not seem to understand the question, to judge by the helpless glance he turned upon her.

"I mean what is your name?"

"Name! I haven't any name," he answered. "I am simply the King of the Grizzlies! If there were any human beings, I should be their king, of course, but since they all perished on the day when the earth became one vast forest, I can only be a king of these bears. See?"

"Perfectly," answered Mrs. Dorsett, concealing her regrets. "How do you live?"

"Live? The woods are full of game of every description—literally overrun with bird and beast."

"But how do you hunt them?"

"I'm not a hunter, but a trapper," explained the madman, with such a quiet air of contentment that his manner seemed quite rational. "I have hosts of traps all around us. You mustn't undertake to walk in these woods unless I am with you, or you might be caught in one of my traps."

"But what do you do for vegetables?"

"Oh, I have plenty of corn and potatoes, and various other things, as you shall see when we go to the house."

Mrs. Dorsett could not help looking her astonishment at finding him so well provided.

"Of course I have to keep warm winters," added the madman, "and to do so I have been obliged to cut down hundreds of trees. I suppose I must have cleared scores of acres, first and last, but the trees come in again quickly if I cease to cultivate."

"You must want for tools," said Mrs. Dorsett, half-forgetting her weariness in the inter-

est she felt in the strange being beside her. "Have you a plow?"

"No; nothing but a spade—such as miners use—and that is almost worn out. It may have belonged to a miner once. The name 'Wharton' is cut in the handle, but I haven't the least idea who he could have been. But come," and he arose with kindly dignity. "Let me have the honor of entertaining you at my house. I have not yet had my breakfast, and I dare say you are hungry."

"Perhaps I can help you get breakfast," returned Mrs. Dorsett, smilingly, as she arose and followed him. "That'll be real nice, won't it?"

"Perfectly heavenly!" and the rugged face of the hermit glowed with enthusiasm. "Haven't seen anything like it since the world was depopulated! Take my arm, please, so as not to walk into one of my traps. How charming! how delightful! You cannot imagine how glad I am to meet you! If you hadn't come just as you did, I fear I should have gone out of my mind—it's so very trying to be the last man and to live in a world which is everywhere nothing but woods, woods, woods!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE HERMIT'S ANGEL.

SUCH a queer little hut as was the hermit's! Mrs. Dorsett had never before seen anything like it.

It stood in such a queer situation, too, with a high ledge of rocks rising perpendicularly behind it, and another precipice descending perpendicularly to a brook just below it, so that it occupied a position midway between the top of the ledge and the general level of the forest.

The aspects and features of the hut were worthy of its strange situation.

It was built of logs, which had been squared, and also dovetailed at the corners where they joined ends, so that the edifice was stout enough to have served as quarters for an elephant.

It was about fifteen feet in length by twelve in width.

It was of course only one story in height, and the space it inclosed had all been thrown into one apartment, except that there was a small triangular pantry in one corner.

At one end was a door, and at the other a stone fireplace and chimney, which had been built with a great deal of patience and toil, and which were in every way perfectly serviceable, the chinks between the stones having been filled with a river-clay which was almost an equivalent for mortar.

Overhead was a half-loft, or a loft occupying one-half of the length of the hut, which, although small and low, was large and high enough to sleep in, and to this retreat access had been had by a ladder.

This loft was now in disuse, however, as was shown by the manner in which the ladder was strapped to one of the walls of the lower apartment.

At one side of the hut was a small lean-to which was reached through a doorway, and which was used as a bedroom, there being a bunk along the inside of its outer wall, at a distance of a couple of feet from the floor.

This lean-to was almost new, as was shown by the color of the wood, and it was easy to understand its origin.

With increasing age, the strange hermit had experienced a dislike to ascending the ladder to the little loft, and had accordingly provided himself with sleeping accommodations upon the same floor as his principal apartment.

The furniture of this singular abode was simple enough.

To begin with, there was a table about four feet square, which had the inconvenience of being without leaves, and consequently monopolized a great deal of space.

Then there was a huge chair, with immense arms, and a rustic lounge, with a mattress of grass and skins, and also a single three-legged stool, which evidently owed its existence to the desire of the hermit to have a portable seat, so that he could use it on the rocky ledge in front of his door, or on the hill-top adjacent.

The floor was a neat piece of work, considering that it had been executed with an ax, it consisting of straight pieces of hewn saplings about four inches square, and laid smoothly side by side.

There was a fire on the hearth, and a small iron tea-kettle was singing merrily over the blaze.

The hut, like everything in it, had evidently been wrought out with an ax, with some assistance from a pocket-knife, these being, with the spade of which the hermit had spoken, the only tools visible on the premises, with the exception of a well-worn pick.

The ax was nearly as worn as the spade, and was evidently highly prized by the hermit, as it was suspended back of his table in a couple of rests, in such a way as to suggest that he considered it somewhat in the light of a weapon of defense.

This ax, too, like the spade, bore the name of "Wharton," which had been burned into the end of the handle.

On the table were two tin plates and the same number of pans—all so old that the tin had nearly vanished from them.

In the corner of the fireplace hung a small frying-pan, of the kind so generally affected by miners and prospectors.

Upon a shelf over the precipice was a great quantity of woodenware of every description, as well as of all shapes and sizes—cups, bowls, pails and platters—the laborious carving of which, with such tools as the hermit possessed, had doubtless consumed many a long winter evening.

It was with a visible pride in his possessions that the hermit preceded Mrs. Dorsett up the well-worn path leading to the door of the hut.

And it would have been a curious sight to see the four enormous grizzlies stalking in the same direction, but not without taking care to remain at a considerable distance from their master and his guest.

"How tame they are!" Mrs. Dorsett could not help remarking, as her glances turned anew to them.

"Yes, but not without cause," responded the hermit. "Any creature, man included, is tame or wild, according to the state of its stomach. It's the stomach which speaks, in all situations, whether you're dealing with a man or with a quadruped. These grizzlies are tame because they've been fed to repletion—fairly stuffed, in fact—and that wild hunger which generally controls an animal in a state of nature is no longer active in them. This is why they're so fat and lazy."

"But what do you feed them?"

"Chiefly meat, although they'll eat anything, and are in the habit of scouring around the forest a great deal for acorns and roots. I catch a great many deer with my pitfalls and twitch-ups, and I've often divided a noble stag or doe among these four boarders, after first taking off the hide for my own use. I also give them corn-cake and potatoes. Once or twice, when I didn't feel very well and neglected them, they got into my growing crops and did great damage."

"How long have they been living here?"

"The oldest one came a long time ago—I don't remember how many winters—and the others have dropped in at different times since. That smallest one was nearly starved when he arrived, one cold winter night, and I thought he'd eat me out of house and home before I could tame him enough to make it safe for me to open the door. I fed him two days through a hole which I left in one side of the hut to serve as a window. They play a great deal, in the style of kittens, but occasionally they have a regular scrimmage, and many a time they've been off for a prowl in the woods, sometimes staying away two or three days. When such is the case I lay in plenty of meat and boiled potatoes, so as to be ready for them on their return, or they'd be likely to make me serious trouble."

As interesting as these details were to Mrs. Dorsett, she heaved a deep sigh.

What a life was that thus brought to her notice!

"But that is not all," resumed the hermit, with an air of keen delight at having somebody to talk to. "In addition to the ointment they dislike so much, I make another, which is as agreeable to these grizzlies as is the smell of whisky to a toper. Here is some of it."

Mrs. Dorsett examined the compound in question, and even smelt of it.

"It is certainly less disagreeable than the other," she remarked, "although it is of the same pungent character."

"You should see 'em come around me when I give 'em a sniff of this," pursued the unknown. "They like it as well as flies like honey. With a little of this on my hands or sleeves, I could cause those fellows to follow me to the end of the world."

"How strange!" murmured Mrs. Dorsett.

"The only other thing in this line I make is a salve to put on my head," added the hermit, as a shadow crept over his features, "but I'm sorry to say that I haven't hit it quite so well in the salve. It don't quite do the business. Perhaps I'll talk with you later about that. Art hungry?"

"Rather tired than hungry, I think, and yet I could eat a bit of venison nicely broiled, if you happen to have some!"

"The very thing!" exclaimed the hermit. "I brought home a young doe yesterday which is as fat as a pig. Never had a nicer one. Of course you know how to cook. I'll show you over the place and you can then take possession, and not merely get breakfast for yourself, but also for me."

With what interest Mrs. Dorsett surveyed the various features of the hut and its contents and surroundings, will be easily imagined.

There was a spring of living water half-way down the precipitous path, and the hermit hastened to fill a large wooden pail there, and place it upon the table.

"What do you do for tea and coffee?" asked the lady, as she proceeded to place fresh water over the fire.

"Oh, I have both," answered the hermit, with

good-natured contentment. "The coffee is made from powdered corn-meal which has been very well browned—perhaps you'd say burnt—and as to tea, I make use of a wild sage which I pluck when the twigs and leaves are young, and which I find very palatable. Make which you like."

He produced both articles from one of the shelves of his pantry.

"We'll try the tea this morning," decided Mrs. Dorsett, continuing to manifest a cheerfulness she was far from feeling, and to turn her thoughts resolutely from the wild unrest and anxiety crowding upon her. "If it tastes as good as it smells, I shall like it."

"As to the venison," added the hermit, "I keep it in a strong box, or cooler, at the side of the house. That's the only cellar I have, and it is very seldom that it freezes in winter, or gets warm in summer. Here it is. Help yourself!"

Making the most of the resources thus placed at her disposal, Mrs. Dorsett was not long in serving up a very good repast.

It included plenty of fried potatoes, she having found in the pantry a wooden platter containing a supply of this vegetable which had been boiled in their skins.

The guest not only forced herself to eat, although she was too worried to have much appetite, but she also talked cheerfully upon a variety of topics, including the life the strange hermit had been so long living in this solitude.

From all she thus saw and learned, she drew the conclusion that her host had once been a miner.

This view of him seemed to be confirmed by the nature and quantity of the tools she found in his possession, which were substantially just what an ordinary miner's outfit would have furnished.

But to all questions on this head, direct or indirect, she could not get any definite answers.

It seemed, in fact, as if the hermit had experienced some sudden shock or a grave illness which had left his memory strangely defective and uncertain.

"About that trouble of the head you are using a salve for," she suggested, when she had finished her repast. "What is its nature?"

"There is a wound on my head which will not heal," was the answer.

"May I see it?"

"Certainly," answered the hermit, with a sigh, "but it has bothered me so long that I do not believe you will be able to do anything with it. I have suffered from it ever since I woke up one morning and found that I was the last man!"

He touched his head a couple of inches above his right ear, and bent nearer.

It was a few moments before Mrs. Dorsett could find the wound, it was buried so deep under a mass of matted hair, but when she did at length discover it, she shivered as if an icy blast had struck her.

"Why, it is a break in your skull," she cried. "You must have received a terrible and perhaps murderous blow upon the head all these years ago."

"I—I can't remember," faltered the sufferer.

"The wound is open to the air," pursued Mrs. Dorsett, with an involuntary thrill of horror in her tones. "It seems to be constantly suppurating. Would you mind if I cut away the hair, so as to see the wound more distinctly?"

"On the contrary, I should be pleased if you would trim me a little," and a grave smile flitted over his face again.

"Fortunately, I have a pair of scissors in my pocket," said Mrs. Dorsett, producing them, "and I can soon make you look like a new man. You're quite willing?"

"Oh, perfectly. Go ahead."

Supplying herself with a basin of tepid water, and using her handkerchief for a sponge, Mrs. Dorsett bathed the matted hair in the vicinity of the wound, and cut it away as carefully as possible.

The task grew more and more painful to her as she proceeded, the injury soon showing itself as a gaping wound of such size as to cause her to wonder that the sufferer should still be alive, but she did not for a moment shrink from the holy labor she had undertaken.

As to the hermit, language fails to describe the contentment with which he found himself the object of these kindly ministrations.

Leaning back in his huge chair and closing his eyes, he seemed to find the touch of those fair hands as soothing as a lullaby, notwithstanding the pain they must have necessarily caused him.

"Didn't some enemy try to kill you?" she asked when she had laid bare the wound, clipping away the hair around it.

The patient shook his head dubiously.

"All I know is that I found the wound there when I first knew where I was, all those years ago," he declared. "Do you think somebody tried to kill me?"

"I certainly do! I wonder that any one can live an hour in such a state. I'm glad I happen to have plenty of court-plaster in my pocket. Is your knife very sharp?"

"Like a razor."

"Then I will shave away the hair around the wound and dress it nicely with the court-plaster," pursued Mrs. Dorsett. "If you will kindly transfer yourself to the lounge and lie down, I think I can get at it more readily."

This measure having been taken, she proceeded rapidly with the work in hand, the hermit seeming more and more soothed every moment with these ministrations, and by the time she had covered the wound carefully with the court-plaster the patient had fallen into a quiet and sound slumber.

"Poor man!" sighed Mrs. Dorsett, her eyes filling with sympathetic tears, as she turned away and walked out into the sunlight. "I have no doubt he could be restored to reason if he were placed in the hands of a competent physician. If I can ever get out of this horrible situation, I will see that he receives due attention. In the mean time, what am I to do? How make my way out of this dreadful forest? And what, all this time, is the situation of Olla?"

As painful as were these problems, she seated herself on the doorstep to consider them calmly. As trying as was her situation, she was resolved not to give way to despair for even one moment. She had long since realized that it is the one great duty of life to do the best we can in all times and under all circumstances, and to hope for the best. Despite all that was amiss in her experiences, she still had hope and faith and patience to look for a speedy change for the better.

And she was right!

Even in her sufferings and desolations, there was a promise of greater compensations than she would have dared to imagine.

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW JAKE TOOK LEAVE OF THEM.

The precautions taken for the safe-keeping of Jake Harewood by his captors seemed to be ample.

To begin with, he had been handcuffed.

As a further security, a halter had been attached to each side of the bits of the horse he rode, and the ends of these halters had been duly appropriated by Ned and Dorsett, between whom Jake was riding, as mentioned.

Add to this that the prisoner had been disarmed, and that Constable Wilkins was riding close behind him, and it would seem that every necessary precaution had been taken.

Nevertheless, all three of the men forming Jake's escort had very lively suspicions of their captive.

They knew that he was in a desperate situation enough to risk his life in an effort to escape.

Ned did not even believe that the rascal had the least intention of guiding him to the residence of Harrold Dabshaw.

Such was Ned's interest in knowing that address, however, that he had not hesitated to run some risk to secure it.

If all was right, it would be a very great point gained to know where the said Dabshaw could be found.

If all was wrong, the daring young detective felt fully competent to take care of himself.

Very little was said by Jake or his escort, as they left Big Horn City behind them, ascending the Valley by the road winding along the right bank of the river.

The little party had gone about a couple of miles, when the prisoner called attention to a lateral valley, and said:

"It is here that we enter upon the 'short cut' to which I alluded."

"What! that trail leads to the abode of Harrold Dabshaw?" cried Ned.

"Exactly!"

Ned did not credit the assertion.

The very mien of the prisoner attested that he was lying.

His eyes had become as treacherous and restless as those of a deadly serpent.

But what else could Ned do than pursue his journey?

"All right," he said, after a few moments of reflection. "But let me talk to you in all frankness!"

He drew his revolver and cocked it, adding:

"Your manner, Harewood, seems to me to indicate that you are not dealing honestly with me. I beg to give you fair warning, therefore, that I shall shoot you down at the first sign of treachery."

"That's only fair," returned the prisoner, with as much scorn as sarcasm. "I'm sorry you suspect me, but I cannot wonder at your doing so!"

Silence again fell upon the party, and it lasted until the travelers had ascended the lateral valley somewhat more than a mile.

Then Jake began singing a popular melody in a very high key.

"What is that for?" asked Ned. "To give warning of our approach to some of your confederates?"

"You just keep your eye peeled," returned the prisoner, insolently, "and you'll see what you will see!"

After going a short distance further, the trail

came to a bend where it skirted the edge of a perpendicular precipice some fifty or sixty feet high.

Below, close to the wall of rock, were plenty of pine trees, with broad and dense branches which reached upward even higher than the road.

On reaching this spot, Jake suddenly detached his feet from his stirrups, uttering a loud and peculiar cry, and his horse gave a sudden bound forward, leaving his rider to strike on his feet just behind the animal, with an agility and celerity many a circus-rider would envy.

It was in vain that Ned turned and fired, as threatened beforehand.

Even as the report of his shot resounded, Jake gained the edge of the precipice with two or three bounds, and the next instant he had leaped boldly into the branches of one of the pines, and had gone crashing down into the shaded depths below.

Released by both Ned and Dorsett at the moment of his furious plunge, the horse of the desperate prisoner had gone clattering along the trail, and was a few moments only in passing from view.

"After the villain!" cried Ned, as he threw himself from the saddle.

It was easier said than done.

Not even the professional zeal of Ned and the constable was strong enough to induce them to imitate the example the fugitive had set them, and for two good reasons.

They did not know the distance Jake had fallen, nor did they know what sort of a landing-place he had reached.

As to Dorsett, his hesitation about jumping down the precipice, after the state of weakness to which his imprisonment had reduced him, was rather a virtue than a weakness.

"Of course the fellow was desperate," said the constable, as he stared a moment into the abyss. "We shall probably find him dead on the rocks at the foot of the precipice."

"We shall have to get down there first," said Ned, looking right and left along the edge of the precipice to see if there were any trace of a path by which he could descend in safety.

"We shall have to go back a hundred yards or more," said Dorsett, "before we can descend that ravine. Let me hold your horses while you see what can be done to pursue the rascal."

His words, like the very tones of his voice, attested that he already regarded the escape of Harewood as a foregone conclusion.

Nothing more was said until Ned and Wilkins had turned the precipice and run along its foot to the scene of Harewood's exploit, and then a cry of astonishment escaped them simultaneously.

"An! he's dead then?" cried Dorsett, from above, peering down upon them.

"About as much as you are," replied Ned, in a tone of disgust. "He fell upon a buffer, or cushion, formed of pine branches, and at least eight or ten feet thick."

"And has vanished?"

"Naturally," answered Ned. "He had no earthly reason to wait here for us to come and find him."

"He may have broken a leg and bent no great distance," suggested Wilkins. "Keep a sharp eye around. He may have friends here, and they may give us a shot from one of these thickets before we know it!"

The search was made with due care and watchfulness, and it was prolonged until the entire vicinity had been explored, but not the least trace was seen of the fugitive.

The two men were in the act of turning away when Ned caught sight of an opening in the face of the cliff near the ground.

"Ah, a cave!" he cried. "He may have taken refuge here, Wilkins. It looks like it! See! the mouth of the cave is blockaded with a huge stone! Evidently he has taken refuge inside. Let's pry him out!"

About half an hour was spent in dislodging the huge rock, and then it was seen that there was barely space behind it to receive a small boy.

In other words, the supposed cave, with the rock in its mouth, was an intentional fraud, which had been designed by Harewood and his associates for just such service as it had now rendered.

It was a device to gain time.

It had kept the three men busy at that spot while the desperate ruffian was making good his escape.

CHAPTER XXII.

MORE OF A SURPRISE THAN SHE IMAGINED!

LET us see how Jake had resumed business.

The moment he reached the "cushion" of leaves and branches of which Ned had spoken he gathered himself up, without the least trace of injury, and ran around the point of a wooded ledge of rocks, ascending rapidly a slope which led him out of the depression into which he had so resolutely thrown himself.

This flight was so constantly protected by the overhanging branches of trees, during the first rods, that his enemies could not have possi-

bly caught a glimpse of him, and after that he was wholly beyond the range of their vision.

Continuing his rapid movements, he soon reached a trail leading from the lateral valley directly into Big Horn City.

The moment this trail was reached he uttered a strange cry, like the call of a certain bird, and his horse, which had been trained to respond to this cry, soon sprung into view at an easy pace, and in a few moments came to a halt beside him.

To gain the saddle was the work of a single moment, and the next instant he was jogging quietly toward home.

"You'll find that I have taught my horse a thing or two," he muttered, as he shook his manacled hands in the direction of his captors, "even if I'm not favored with a talking dog and a gift of ventriloquism!"

He was soon beyond all danger of being overheard by his enemies, and then he quickened his pace to a gallop, riding as if mad.

Dashing into his stable before he had even been missed and without allowing any one to discover that he was handcuffed, he told his stable-boy—a shrewd, capable rascal of some fourteen years—to take from his vest pocket a key belonging to a pair of "bracelets" similar to those he was wearing and to set him free, as was instantly done.

"Oh, curse them!" he cried, as he stretched his hands up into the light. "I'll soon be revenged! I'll soon be even with them! Saddle the brown pony, Sam, and do not say a word to any one of my presence and my movements!"

He slipped into his bar and pocketed a couple of bottles of brandy, and in another minute was riding away at full gallop toward the deserted mine where Dorsett had so long been a captive.

We need not pause upon the rescue of the four men the boys had left imprisoned there, namely, Ben Crump, old Harkness, Goff Hinckley, and Baldy Gardner.

Suffice it to say that all five of them were soon rejoicing with closed doors in the bar-room of the Miners' Rest, with a goodly bowl of punch in their midst.

"At last that little trap we have so long set at the Pines has been utilized, Ben," said Harewood, after he had given the details of his escape. "I always knew it would come handy sooner or later. If the enemy hadn't furnished me with an excuse for taking that route, I could of course have readily invented some other. Upon the whole, we're well upon our legs again, and we'll take good care to remain so until those boys have secured rather extensive reinforcements. That they've lost a portion of their assurance is proven by the fact that they have not dared to show up here since my escape."

At this moment there came a knock at the front door of the tavern.

"There they are!" muttered Crump.

"I'll soon see," declared Harewood. "Keep quiet, all of you, and wait for orders!"

Stepping into the hall, he glanced through one of the side-lights at the new-comer.

What he saw caused him to flush and smile.

He stepped back to the bar-room.

"It's a young and pretty girl," he reported, in a whisper. "Not a word! I'll see what she wants!"

He traversed the hall, as the knock was repeated, and drew open the door.

"Walk in, miss," he invited, with his politest tone and manner.

The maiden complied.

She was a splendid-looking girl, not more than seventeen or eighteen years of age, tall and lithe, with beautiful eyes and features, and with a gracefulness in every movement which was as charming as rare.

She was dressed in a neat gray traveling-suit, and at the hitching-post stood a handsome black horse, which had evidently been ridden far and fast.

"You are the landlord, I suppose, sir?" was her first greeting.

Harewood bowed.

"I hope I'm not intruding," she continued, with a fascinating smile. "You seem to be closed—"

"It's only—only to keep out the flies," returned Harewood.

"Then I need not hesitate to ask you if I can remain here a day or two," pursued the maiden. "I shall certainly have to be your guest until I can communicate with my brother."

"Certainly, miss," and Harewood bowed again. "The house and everything in it is at your disposal. Walk into the parlor."

He led the way into the apartment named, offering his guest a chair.

"Perhaps I know your brother," he suggested, something in the girl's looks and manners striking him. "Who is he?"

"His name is Ned Wharton, sir."

Harewood looked disappointed.

This name told him nothing.

Yet he returned to the charge, certain that there was some connection between this fair girl and the objects of his especial wrath.

"What's his business?" he resumed.

"He has come to the Big Horn Valley from Helena, accompanied by a young friend," explained the maiden, as a deeper tinge crept into her cheeks. "They've come here on a secret expedition—to look for certain rogues, in fact, who have long defied the authorities!"

"Oh, indeed!"

The keeper of the "Rest" comprehended, as was attested by the glow upon his features and the gleam in his eyes.

"And you?" he queried, hoarsely, with a visible effort.

"Oh, I have come all alone, sir, from the State of New York," pursued the girl. "My purpose was to surprise my brother and his friend—as I wrote them I might. But more than once I have regretted this step. I have had terrible adventures in getting here!"

"Have you pictures of the young gentlemen?" asked Harewood, with well-simulated carelessness.

"Certainly. Here they are, sir."

Harewood glanced at the photographs she handed out from the bag in her hand.

One glance was enough!

"What did you say their names are, miss?" he demanded.

"Ned Wharton and Bob Carpenter!"

The tavernkeeper smiled grimly.

He had got the couple down in their true colors at last!

"And your name is—"

"Lizzie, sir. Lizzie Wharton!"

She was indeed the fair girl who has so often been alluded to in our narrative.

"I have seen the young gentlemen," avowed the tavernkeeper, controlling his wild jubilation. "In fact, they spent the night here."

"I understood they were in this neighborhood," said Lizzie, frankly. "They're not here now?"

"No, miss. They've gone to look for one of the rogues you've alluded to. But they'll be back here to dinner, and I shouldn't be surprised to see 'em at any moment."

"Then I must remain here and wait for them. Will you show me to a room?"

"With pleasure. This way, please."

He conducted the maiden to the room to which he had shown Bob and Ned the previous evening.

"Sit down, miss, and make yourself at home," he invited. "I'll ask my stable-boy if your brother has left any word about his movements for the day. Excuse me a few minutes."

And with this he withdrew.

Dashing into the bar-room, he seized a decanter and filled a tumbler with brandy, turning it down his throat.

"Such luck!" he gasped. "I shall go mad with joy!"

His cronies crowded around him, wondering and excited, looking like so many interrogation points.

"What do you think, boys?" he panted. "The girl is the sister of one of those accursed cowboys, and the betrothed of the other. How strange!"

It was indeed a singular fatality which had thrown Lizzie Wharton into the hands of the deadly enemies of her brother and lover.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN EXCITING SITUATION.

THE joy of the listening outlaws at the turn affairs had taken was simply infernal.

"Sure!" queried Ben Crump.

"Oh! the girl has given herself away completely, and the cowboys with her," assured Harewood. "She even showed me their pictures, giving me their names."

"And who are they?" pursued Crump.

"The brother is named Ned Wharton. The girl's his living image, so that I suspected at a glance what sort of a prize Fate had sent me."

"And the ventriloquist?"

"His name is Bob Carpenter. The pair are here to 'look for certain rogues,' as the girl avowed in so many words."

He added the various particulars Lizzie had given him, and the joy of the outlaws deepened with every word he uttered.

"From all this," at length commented Crump, "the cowboys do not even know that the girl has left her Eastern home?"

"Certainly not. She wanted to 'surprise' 'em, and I reckon she will!"

The outlaws realized the importance of the turn Fate had played them.

With Lizzie Wharton in their hands, they were masters of the situation.

They could undo all the cowboys had done and bring to naught anything they might accomplish in the future.

"Of course we'll freeze to her!" declared Ben Crump, with grim satisfaction.

"She's a hostage for the good behavior of her brother and lover," said old Harkness.

"She must go to the deserted mine, or some equally good place for safe-keeping," suggested Goff Hinckley.

"With that girl in our hands, we can force the intruders to evacuate the Big Horn Valley," remarked Baldy Gardner.

A deeper gleam came to the eyes of Jake Harewood, as he stirred uneasily.

His pards had never before seen such a glow upon his features.

"One word, boys," he muttered.

He helped himself to another glass of brandy, which disappeared at a dash, and resumed:

"The game I'm going to play, boys, is deeper than any of you have hinted. That girl's the one I've been waiting for all these years! Such a beauty! Such a brave, honest face! Her glance has gone like a flash o' lightning from my head to my heels, and lifted me completely out of my boots!"

His hearers understood him.

"What! in love?" returned Ben Crump.

"Call it what you like," avowed the tavern-keeper, with an emotion that shook his form. "That girl shall be my wife, boys! I'm not going to let her go out of my hands under any pretense whatever!"

At this moment a series of energetic taps resounded upon a window at one side of the bar-room.

"Let me in, Jake," called a feminine voice.

"It's my wife," said Ben Crump.

He hastened to admit her at a side door.

She was even more excited than her brother and his pards, and her advent served to intensify the emotions under which they were all laboring.

"You look scared, dear," said Ben. "Have you seen a ghost?"

"Yes—or something worse!"

She sunk panting into a chair.

"Why didn't you come to the front door?" asked Harewood.

"Because I didn't want that new arrival to see me."

"That girl, you mean?"

"Yes, that girl—Lizzie Wharton."

"What! you've seen her?" pursued Jake.

"Yes, and she has seen us!" affirmed Mrs. Crump significantly. "In a word, we tried to play that toll-gate trick upon her, and she slipped through our noose and made her escape."

The importance of this revelation could have been read in the faces of the startled hearers.

It was very rare for the "toll-gate trick" to miscarry.

"And such a fury as she proved to be!" pursued Mrs. Crump. "She did not lose a moment in finding the *real* sheriff of the district, and in heading a raid on the toll-gate house. Old Kenyon brought such a *posse* with him that resistance was out of the question. The place was scoured from top to bottom—"

Her voice died away in a whisper of terror and consternation.

"And everything's discovered?" cried Ben Crump and his brother-in-law in chorus.

"Everything," declared Mrs. Crump. "Kenyon knows that the toll-gate house was built to entrap unwary travelers, and that the pike was designed to run our victims into it. The old man and his *posse* have even been searching for the dead."

Ben Crump and the tavern-keeper exchanged glances of comprehension.

"This is serious," murmured the latter.

"Serious!" echoed the sister. "We're completely ruined. Especially if we allow that girl to join the friends for whom she is looking. Have you any idea who they are?"

"Yes, they are the cowboys who passed a night at father's—those fellows who pretended to be looking for a white antelope. We know their real names, and what they're driving at, and all about them. You can't imagine what high old times we've been having with them already! Did you come alone?"

"Yes. Father and mother are quietly packing up and getting things into snug shape, but there'll be no necessity of flight if we can keep this girl out of sight."

"Well, she's 'out of sight' at this moment, and likely to remain so," declared the tavern-keeper, with a sinister smile. "She's not only in my hands, and at my mercy, but she'll remain so as long as her brother and the rest are on the war-path. In fact, I've decided to shut her up in the deserted mine until all these dangers are past."

"That's the only thing to do, Jake," commented Mrs. Crump. "I'm glad she has fallen into your hands. In the mean time, give me a hot whisky and tell me all that has happened."

The explanations in the case were duly given, while Mrs. Crump rested and sipped her whisky.

"You've had a narrow escape," she commented, when her brother had concluded, "and you're sure to have further trouble if you allow yourself to get spoony on that girl. From what I've seen, her choice is already made. Her lover is that ventriloquist."

"In any case, she's the nucleus of our defense," avowed Harewood, "and I'm going to hide her where neither her brother nor lover will find her. As Harkness has suggested, she can be turned to account as a hostage. Her friends will think twice before they drive us to despair if they know that the girl is in our hands."

"I agree with all that, Jake, but don't let her

take you in," returned Mrs. Crump. "Where is she at this moment?"

"In the room you and Ben have had so often."

"Why, she can get out of it without the least trouble. She may be gone already."

"Oh, no. I've told her a good story, and she's waiting to see her brother and lover. But I'll go and prepare her for a ride to the deserted mine. I can get her to ride that way by pretending that I am taking her to her brother."

"She'll suspect you, Jake. You can do nothing with her," assured Mrs. Crump. "I never saw anybody so wide awake and suspicious."

"Then so much the worse for her—that's all," said Jake Harewood. "If she does not come by fair means, she'll come by force! But I think I can manage her. Wait for me here, all of you; and keep a sharp lookout for all intruders."

And with this he hurried to the presence of his fascinating guest.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE BOYS AT IT AGAIN.

NOT long after Bob established himself, with Demon, at the cottage of Constable Wilkins to see if he could learn anything concerning the whereabouts of Dabshaw he was visited by Dr. Barker.

The doctor, having been duly enlightened in regard to the whereabouts and proceedings of Ned, became gloomy and abstracted, and at length shook his head energetically.

"I'm sorry to hear what you tell me," he declared. "Your friend has made a mistake—a very serious mistake—in accepting Jake Harewood as a guide to Dabshaw's. Jake knows, of course, where Dabshaw is, but he's the last man to betray this knowledge to an enemy. That fellow'll contrive to trick your friend in some way and make his escape!"

"Hardly, doctor. Ned'll look out for him."

"But all the 'looking out' in the world does not cover the case," pursued the doctor. "You've no idea what tricks the members of the Big Horn gang are up to. Why, the other day five of 'em dressed up as soldiers and a lieutenant, and took a prisoner away from a sheriff, with a pretended order from the commander of Fort Custer! On the two principal roads out of Big Horn City these outlaws keep regular pickets whom they can notify as to just what is wanted by singing some popular air. For instance, if a prisoner is being run off to jail, he'll sing 'John Brown' as he approaches one of these secret posts, and in three minutes he'll be at large again and his captors'll be dead or fugitive. Ten to one, Mr. Carpenter, Jake Harewood'll make his escape from your friend by some such process as I've indicated!"

These statements made Bob uneasy enough.

"Let's go and take a walk, doctor," he proposed.

"That's just what I was about to say," returned the doctor. "I'd like to show you about the place, and I can give you a great deal of information about these men while we are taking the fresh air."

The couple walked out, accompanied by Demon, and for a time Bob forgot his anxieties in what he saw and in what Dr. Barker told him, but the general tendency of what he saw and heard was to make him gloomier than ever.

He found, too, that he and Demon were attracting more attention than was pleasant, and for these and other reasons was not long in proposing a return to the Wilkins cottage.

"Come home with me," invited the doctor.

Bob shook his head and replied:

"No, doctor. I'm convinced that your forebodings will be realized, and that Ned'll soon be back, looking for me where he left me. I'll stay right here until I see my way more clearly, or have advice."

The wait did not prove so long as expected, for the doctor had not yet left when he saw Ned coming at a gallop, with Dorsett and Wilkins behind him.

"What did I tell you?" cried Barker, at sight of the trio. "Their prisoner has escaped. If I had been here, at the moment they were setting out, I would have spared them this humiliation."

Little more was said until the trio rode into the yard, and then Bob opened the door and looked out.

"Leave your horse with Wilkins and come in Ned," he called. "We're dying to hear the news."

Ned hastened to join him, at the same time withdrawing himself from the public gaze, and the story of his disappointment was soon told.

"Of course Harewood has long since returned to the Miners' Rest," was Bob's first comment. "More than that," and he glanced at his watch, "he has set free those chaps we left in the deserted mine. At least six or eight of these rascals will soon be swilling whisky in noisy triumph at Harewood's. What's equally clear is, that we've given them a regular awakener, and that they'll all go upon the war-path as ferociously as possible. I shouldn't wonder at all if they were to come here boldly

and make the attempt to shoot us down in our tracks."

"Oh, they're not that kind," said Dr. Barker, "but they'll certainly do all they can in an underhanded and treacherous fashion. You must be wide awake and on your guard constantly. The turn affairs have taken is sure to set them up immensely."

"Nevertheless, I'll soon find means to cut their combs," declared Ned. "We're still in possession of resources of which they do not dream. For instance, I can disguise myself as an old man, with white hair and beard—say, as a road-agent from Deadwood or Denver—and go to the 'Rest' and take a room, giving out that I am expecting a friend by the next stage. In this way, Bob, we can install ourselves at the 'Rest,' and post ourselves fully as to just who is with Harewood and what they're going to do."

"I doubt if you can disguise yourselves so that Harewood will not know you," said the doctor.

"You think so? Just wait till we have got ourselves up for the occasion."

Taking possession of their "kits," and retiring to the bedroom placed at their disposal by Mrs. Wilkins, the young detectives proceeded to disguise themselves in the style indicated, the doctor and Dorsett, who were soon joined by the constable, waiting to see what would be the result of their efforts.

In the midst of a little discussion in which Dr. Barker was taking the principal part, a scream was heard from Mrs. Wilkins, and the good lady came bounding into their presence, looking strangely scared and startled.

"Do come here, husband," she cried. "Here are a couple of strange men, with guns, who are evidently looking for those boys."

The constable hastened to the rescue, followed by his guests, and promptly placed himself in the path of the new-comers, raising his hand to bar their progress.

"No further, gentlemen, till I know your business," he commanded.

"We want Doctor Barker," returned the foremost of the two men.

"I am Doctor Barker," responded that gentleman, advancing and bowing politely. "What can I do for you?"

The response was a chuckle of contentment.

"I reckon we'll do, doctor," said the first old man, in the voice of Ned Wharton.

"Clearly enough, our disguises must be good, since none of you recognize us," said the other.

"Bless my soul! if it isn't those boys!" cried Mrs. Wilkins.

The grim countenances of the constable and his guests relaxed.

"Sure enough!" exclaimed the doctor. "You have chosen to let out the secret by speaking in your natural voices, or you might have kept us in ignorance forever!"

"You think we'll pass, then?" queried Ned.

"Pass? Most assuredly! I wouldn't believe such a transformation possible!"

"A little paint, powder, and hair'll go a good ways, if rightly applied, and accompanied by a change of clothes," said Ned. "And now for a hint in regard to our plans. Bob and I have agreed to smuggle ourselves into the 'Rest' in these outfits, and will pass the next hour or two there. I'm to go first, and Bob will arrive half an hour later. But you look serious, doctor. What would you say?"

"Simply this," returned Barker. "What you propose to do is a very bold proceeding. No doubt you'll make a success of it, but what if you shouldn't?"

"We sn'll, doctor," assured Ned.

"Nevertheless, I desire to add a brief amendment to your programme," pursued the doctor, as he led the way into the house. "You know where that barn is, a hundred yards the other side of the 'Rest,' which was so severely damaged by the late cyclone and has not been repaired?"

The boys nodded.

"Well, that place belonged to my late sister. It is at present unoccupied, and hence is at my disposal. I'll accordingly go there, with Mr. Dorsett and the constable, as soon as you have both left us. I'll take along all the horses we can muster, with my medicine-case and surgical instruments, for it's quite possible that there'll be sore heads or something worse in our camp before the day is over. We'll all go armed, and we'll supply ourselves with a day's provisions. If you get smoked out of the 'Rest,' therefore, you must hasten to join us at the barn in question, and we'll fight or run, just as may seem desirable."

"I like the proposition," said Dorsett. "It will at least enable me to bear the strain of the risk you are running."

"I also like the doctor's propositions," declared the constable. "It's only prudent to carry them out!"

"So be it, then," said Ned. "Bob and I'll take it for granted that you'll all be at the barn in question half an hour hence, and in the shape stated."

"Let me add one word," resumed Barker.

"Although I've never mentioned the matter in

Big Horn City, I paid a visit to Harrold Dabshaw last summer. He sent his man for me—a fellow named Bowser. He had sprained his ankle severely, and fancied some of the bones were broken. He lives in a splendid house which he built in the midst of a howling wilderness, a long time ago, and which is as much of a howling wilderness as ever. I was a day in going there, and another day in returning, although we took a direct route through the great forest. The distance must be near fifty miles. Such being the situation of affairs, Mr. Wharton, I think I could guide you to Dabshaw's, if you should be anxious, after investigating affairs at the 'Rest,' to take a ride in that direction!"

"Ten thousand thanks!" cried Ned, earnestly. "That is a ride we'll surely take! In taking possession of the barn, as arranged, please bear in mind that the ride to Dabshaw's is to be accomplished immediately!"

"It is agreed," returned the doctor. "I'll make all the necessary arrangements, so as to start the moment you and Mr. Carpenter join us. To be frank with you, I believe you'll find it necessary to vacate the 'Rest' in a hurry. About the dog here, shall we take charge of him?"

"Yes, and I beg of you to take such a firm charge of him, that he will not have a chance to follow us to the 'Rest.' The truth is, Demon has a great advantage over a man, and readily knows us under any style or garb we see fit to adopt."

"Then the best we can do is to put a stout rope around his neck and keep hold of it," said the constable. "Another thing, we'll not take him past the 'Rest,' on our way to the barn, but will take him there by a roundabout way. It would be awkward enough if he were to get away and come to the 'Rest' looking for you. His very arrival there would be enough to betray you."

"I see you understand the situation," said Ned, smilingly, as he picked up a small sachel, "and now to act. I'll be off!"

CHAPTER XXV.

GETTING MORE THAN THEY CAME FOR.

WITH a few final suggestions, Ned left the cottage, taking his way quietly along the street, and in due course reached the Miners' Rest, where he knocked for admittance, the door being closed and locked.

A window was soon raised a few inches, and Jake Harewood peered out with a singular air of watchfulness and suspicion.

"Are you closed?" asked Ned, in a hoarse tone that was as far removed from his natural voice as was possible.

"Yes—on account of a sudden death in the family," was Jake's answer. "Nevertheless," he pursued, as if favorably impressed and unwilling to turn money from his door, "I suppose you can be accommodated. Who are you?"

"I am Colonel Barrow, a land-agent of Denver," was Ned's answer. "Possibly the name's familiar to you."

He produced a card of a kind with which he was always liberally supplied, on such expeditions as now occupied him, and passed it carelessly to his questioner.

"Where's your horse?" queried Jake, looking up and down the street wonderingly.

"He has gone so dead lame that I had to leave him at a ranch three miles up the valley."

"I see," commented Jake, with a satisfied air. "I'll let you in."

He hastened to do so, closing and locking the door the moment Ned had entered.

"You want a room, I suppose, colonel?" he then demanded.

"Certainly, as I have some papers to draw up and a few letters to write," replied the pretended colonel. "I shall want dinner, and probably supper and lodgings."

The tavern-keeper reflected a moment, but evidently without the least suspicion of the newcomer.

He was merely asking himself if the colonel would be at all in the way of the execution of his schemes against Lizzie Wharton.

"The length of my stay," added Ned, "depends upon the arrival of a friend, whom I have requested to meet me here as early in the day as possible."

If Jake had any misgivings about receiving guests at such a moment, he did not express them. Probably he had none which were not readily quieted by the thought of the profits he could reap from his guests. It is probable, too, that he knew of various ways of dealing with Lizzie, even if she did not readily accept his falsehoods. At any rate, he hastened to say:

"All right, colonel. Follow me, please."

Leading the way along the hall, Jake ascended the stairs, and showed Ned into a room exactly over that into which he had showed Lizzie Wharton half an hour earlier.

"I would like you to show my friend up here whenever he comes," said Ned, continuing to speak in his assumed voice.

"I will do so. You have your writing materials, I presume?" and Jake glanced at the little sachel in his guest's hand.

"Yes, thank you. I need trouble you no further just at present."

Bowing understandingly, Harewood retreated, and Ned was left to himself.

Some twenty minutes later, a second old man appeared at the Miners' Rest, with very quiet manners, and asked if Colonel Barrow had already arrived.

"Ah, you are the gentleman the colonel expects," exclaimed Harewood. "Where's your horse?"

"I've already consigned him to your boy."

"Walk in, sir. The colonel's room is number four, at the head of the stairs. Walk up."

Bob complied, very heavily and slowly, as became a man of his apparent years, while Harewood returned to the bar-room.

In another moment Bob had joined Ned, and the two exchanged congratulations in a guarded whisper at finding themselves received as guests and ready to take careful note of all their surroundings.

"Let's open one of these windows," then said Bob. "It will not only be nice to let in some fresh air, but it may be of use if we should suddenly become the objects of a violent suspicion!"

The window having been duly opened, the boys sat down near it, and prepared to arrange their programme for getting Jake Harewood again into their clutches, this being of course the objective point of their present aspirations and proceedings.

"If necessary, we'll stay here till night and steal him out of his bed," said Ned. "Fortunately, we know where he sleeps!"

They had discussed their project in its various bearings when they were suddenly startled beyond measure by a musical warbling which came up to their hearing from the room under them, the windows of which were open.

"In Heaven's name!" gasped Bob. "Do you hear that? Am I mad as a loon, or is that really the voice of Lizzie?"

The cowboys hastened to look out of the window, listening with such intensity that it could not have been seen that they still breathed.

There was no possibility of mistaking the identity of the sweet voice that continued to come up to them.

"It is Lizzie!" whispered Bob, his whole frame tremulous with excitement. "As strange and unaccountable as it seems to find her here, that voice can belong to no one else! She must have carried out the suggestion made in her recent letter, and come out here to surprise us!"

"And in doing so she has fallen into the hands of Jake Harewood," returned Ned, as he gained his feet in silence, with as much terror as wonder. "But evidently she is not a prisoner!"

"No, or she would not be singing in that light-hearted fashion. And it's possible, too, that Jake does not know who she is. Be all that as it may, we must hasten to communicate with her."

Leaning out of the window, as the song suddenly ceased, he uttered a few notes of a popular melody he and Lizzie had often sung together.

The effect was instantaneous.

The maiden was heard to spring up abruptly and bound to the window, looking up.

Her face attested how thoroughly she was puzzled.

She had not only recognized the melody, but also the voice, as was shown by her questioning and wondering glances.

But she could make nothing out of the two venerable-looking men who were gazing down upon her, except that there was something very singular in their conduct, and also something so strangely familiar in their eyes that she could not remove her gaze from them.

"Don't be alarmed, miss," said Bob, in his natural tone, with a gesture of caution. "We know who you are—"

"Then who am I?"

"Lizzie Wharton."

"And you?"

"We are two of your best friends," assured Bob, while his eyes continued to speak the old, old language that had become so dear to her heart. "Don't be alarmed—don't make the least outcry! We're simply disguised!"

"Ah! can it be—"

"Yes, it can, and it is!" assured Bob. "Despite our aged appearance, we're the couple you're looking for. Caution! We're all in danger here! Keep quiet a moment, and Ned and I'll come down to you!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

RECKONING WITHOUT HIS NEW GUESTS.

LIZZIE merely bowed assent, too pleased and excited for utterance.

"What a strange and unexpected meeting!" ejaculated Ned, as he seized his sachel and hastened toward the door. "I still seem to be dreaming."

"Well, the discovery of her presence here ought to render us unusually wide awake," returned Bob, rapidly. "Here, in the den of Harewood and company. I was never so startled!"

"Nor I, Bob!"

The brother lost no time in following the lover, who was already descending the stairs as lightly and swiftly as a panther, and in another moment Lizzie had opened the door of her room to receive them.

"Hush, darling! No outcries, no noise," enjoined Bob, as he drew the lithe figure to his heart, with the tender caresses warranted by their relations, and then swung her into the arms of her brother. "You wrote us that you might surprise us—and you have! Never so completely astonished in my life!"

"To think of finding you here, in the hands of these desperadoes," cried Ned, as he scanned her features with brotherly joy and admiration. "When did you arrive?"

"Only a few minutes ago."

"On horseback, of course?"

"Yes."

"Where's your horse now?"

"In the stable."

"And whom did you meet here at the moment of your arrival?"

"Why, the landlord!"

"The landlord! What did you say to him?"

Lizzie repeated the conversation she had had with Harewood, as near as she could remember it.

When she had finished the boys exchanged horrified glances.

"Well, all I can say is," then declared Ned, caressing his sister again, "you've come very near getting your precious little foot into it!"

"How so, Ned?"

"Why, these men are our deadliest enemies," explained the brother. "The landlord has been in our hands this morning, bound and helpless, as a prisoner, and made his escape from us only at the greatest peril to life and limb. About all he told you was a lie. He did not expect us here again."

"Then why did he tell me—"

"He simply told you what he did to get you into his hands," interrupted Bob, in a hurried whisper. "His intention is to retain you in captivity; to hold you as a hostage for our good conduct; to be revenged upon you for the annoyance we've caused him—"

"Hush!" enjoined Ned.

He sprang to the door and looked out.

"The rascal is coming to see you, Lizzie," he announced, closing the door noiselessly.

"Do not be alarmed. Hear what he has to say. Remember that we are within call and hearing in the closet."

And with this the young detectives vanished into a wardrobe at one corner of the apartment, just as there came a knock on the girl's door.

"Come in," cried Lizzie, after seeing that her brother and lover were duly eclipsed.

Jake Harewood entered, bowing civilly enough, but with a countenance that was in itself a revelation.

His eyes looked almost wild with the strange light of triumph in them.

"Sit down, sir," invited Lizzie. "You've come to report what message my brother left, as you said you would?"

"Well, not exactly," returned Harewood, his face glowing with suppressed jubilation, as he sat down in such a way as to barricade the door. "The truth is, I—I was deceiving you about your brother. He does not know that you are here!"

"Is that your opinion, sir?"

"That is the fact! I'm here now to deal with you frankly. Your brother and I have had a considerable scrimmage, and until you came it was a sort of drawn battle, but I'm now a long ways ahead."

"I do not understand you."

"Well, you'll comprehend me clearly enough before I'm done with you. Your friends came here under false colors, pretending that they were Hiram Stokes and Nat Skinner, from Ohio, and that they were looking for a white antelope. They even showed a paragraph in a newspaper of Helena to that effect."

"I am sorry they did not write me at length concerning their intentions," said Lizzie, in a tone loud enough to reach the ears of the listeners. "Had they done so, I should not have inquired after them under their real names!"

"Of course not! But it's too late to whine now! You've let the cat out of the bag. They're in a fair way to miss their white antelope, but I've found mine!"

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Lizzie, sternly.

"Oh, you needn't flame up in that style, miss," said Harewood, with smiling brutality. "Since a kindly fate has accorded me a good thing, I know enough to keep it! To sum up all I have to say in a word, Miss Wharton, you are a prisoner in my hands, and a prisoner you'll long remain if only that I may be revenged upon your accursed brother and your lover!"

"You talk like a madman," returned Lizzie, with a well-assumed yawn. "Do you suppose I've traveled alone all the way from New York to be intimidated by a Big Horn bully? You had better beat a retreat while your limbs and lungs are in good order."

"I'll go when I get ready, miss. And let me add a word that it may be well for you to ponder. No less than seven of my friends are in the bar-room below, and they quite approve of my plans concerning you, and are ready to come to my assistance immediately at the slightest call!"

"Then perhaps I had better jump out of the window, as the easiest way of getting rid of you," said Lizzie, as she stepped in the direction indicated.

"I'll see to that," said Harewood, as he arose and locked the door of the apartment, putting the key in his pocket. "I'll show you that I know how to tame you," and he hastened to lower the windows. "You evidently need the lesson!"

"Enough!" cried Lizzie, in the shrill tones of alarm the sinister proceedings of the intruder were so well calculated to produce.

The boys understood her, hastening from their concealment.

The noise made by Harewood in lowering the second window was so loud as to prevent him from hearing the movements behind him, and the first intimation he had of the presence of Ned and Bob was the cold chill of the muzzle of a revolver at each side of his head.

"Not a word, Jake, if life's worth having," enjoined Ned, whose glances were even more menacing than his words. "You see that fate has played you an unkindly trick again. Not a word or a movement, or I'll scatter your brains!"

"I—I sit down," gasped Harewood, suiting the action to the word. "I know who you are now—those accursed boys! I might call for assistance—"

"You can do as you like about it," interrupted Ned, whose anger was really hot, "but I'll drop you dead at the least cry, I promise you!"

There was no mistaking the meaning of these words, and Harewood weakened completely.

"I surrender!" he said.

"That's the only thing you can do," commented Ned, sternly. "We've had enough of your insolence, and care very little for your seven waiting friends in the bar-room. They'll wait in vain for your return to them, I assure you!"

The hands of the two boys had been busy while these few remarks were being exchanged, and in less than another minute Harewood had been reduced to the helplessness of a mummy.

A glance from the door told Ned that all was quiet below, and then he raised one of the windows of the apartment and looked out.

"All is still," he reported. "There's no difficulty in the way of our retreat, as I see. Will you go first, Lizzie?"

"Certainly."

She seized her traveling-bag and stepped through the window, leaping lightly to the ground.

The prisoner was wrapped in a blanket, which gave him still more the aspect of a mummy, and he was then lowered with scant ceremony from the window.

Another moment, and the boys were bearing him across the field to the barn, where Dr. Barker and the rest were waiting.

"That dear doctor!" remarked Ned, in a jubilant tone. "How much we owe to his foresight, as the case has turned. Whatever may happen now, we're sure to get clear of Big Horn City with our prisoner."

"Don't crow till we're out of the woods," returned Bob, with a swift glance around, which was accompanied by a reassuring smile to Lizzie, who was bringing up the rear. "I saw that stable-boy look at us a moment, and then make a grand break for the bar-room—no doubt to give the alarm."

"Then let us hasten," proposed Ned.

Notwithstanding the heaviness of the weight swinging between them, the daring young heroes broke into a run, and were glad to see that they had been seen by the doctor, as also by Wilkins and Dorsett, who were already getting their horses ready for instant departure.

"A few moments more," said Ned, "and we shall be able—"

It was all he could say.

A tremendous uproar suddenly resounded from the Miners' Rest, as the friends of Harewood came bursting out into view, and in another moment a volley of bullets whistled around the fugitives.

"Quick!" cried Doctor Barker. "They're rushing for their horses! There's not an instant to lose! They're going to pursue us!"

What a lively mount was that which succeeded! and what a furious departure!

And not an instant too soon.

The seven allies of Harewood, including Ben Crump and old Harkness, were already thundering in pursuit.

CHAPTRE XXVII.

A SURPRISE FOR DABSHAW.

HARROLD DABSHAW had scarcely driven out of sight from his house, with Mrs. Dorsett lying unconscious in his wagon, as related in a

former chapter, when a young lady and gentleman drove up in a neat top buggy, and attracted the attention of Bowser, to whom the young gentleman beckoned, at the same time bringing his horse to a stop.

"Who lives here?" asked the stranger.

The dark-faced and taciturn Bowser did not quite like to answer.

In a general way, he was as reserved as his master, he having been taught during many a long year to say as little about the affairs of Dabshaw as possible.

Nevertheless, as there seemed nothing very menacing in the aspect or bearing of the young couple, and the question itself was as natural and innocent as any question can be, the factotum took the liberty of answering:

"Mr. Dabshaw—Harrold Dabshaw."

The young gentleman turned to the lady.

"You see that we're right, dearest," he said, with a look of relief. "This is the place."

Then his gaze and attention came back to Bowser.

"Is Mr. Dabshaw at home?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"When will he be visible?"

"Perhaps in an hour, sir—perhaps not until later in the evening."

The new-comers exchanged a few words which did not reach Bowser's hearing.

"I am sorry Mr. Dabshaw is not here," then said the young stranger, turning again to the factotum. "From all I know of him, it was easy to take it for granted that we should find him here at any moment. You are his representative, I suppose? Perhaps his hired man?"

The factotum assented.

"Then no harm's done," said the stranger.

"I must simply ask you to receive us in Mr. Dabshaw's place."

He leaped to the ground, assisting the lady to alight, without noticing the hesitation and embarrassment of Bowser, to whom he then gave his further attention.

"Mr. Dabshaw is my father," he said. "I am his son Charles, who has so long been attending school and college in the East. This lady is Mrs. Dabshaw, my wife!"

The factotum had received each of these announcements as a distinct and separate shock.

At each he recoiled a step, raising his hands higher and higher in visible amazement.

"Of course you've heard of me," added young Dabshaw, surveying the countenance of the hired man as well as he could in the gathering darkness. "I have written my father that I was about to appear here, and dare say he has mentioned the matter to you."

"Yes, sir. Your father has spoken of you occasionally, and I have posted the letters he has sent you, as well as brought from the mail those you have sent him. But he never mentioned that you expected to bring a wife home with you!"

"No, Bowser—for I believe that is your name," returned young Dabshaw. "The lady is a surprise which I have not yet mentioned to my father. But is this secret a cause of the constraint I remark in your manner?"

"Not—not exactly," answered Bowser.

To be candid, the factotum was thinking of the mother who had been carried into the great forest to be abandoned to the wolves, and of the daughter who had been left in the wine-vault in such a painful and helpless situation.

"Then what is it?" asked young Dabshaw.

"I—I will tell you later," answered Bowser, "after I have taken your horse to the stable. Will you and the lady come in that direction with me?"

"And why in that direction?" asked young Dabshaw, with a look of amazement. "Why don't you show us into the house, or at least ask us to walk in?"

"That's easier said than done, Mr. Dabshaw," said Bowser. "The fact is, sir, the house is locked up, and I haven't a key. Your father has taken the keys with him."

"Odd, is it not, Cecile?" asked the husband, turning to his wife.

"Perhaps so, dearest, and yet, you must remember that we are in a region where it would not do to leave the doors ajar," was Mrs. Dabshaw's answer.

"That's true," assented young Dabshaw.

"I simply meant," explained Bowser, "that I would try to open the house for you, as soon as the horse is in the stable."

"Very well. That seems reasonable enough. Lead on, Bowser. We'll follow you."

No more was said until the horse had been ushered into the yard at the back of the house, and the high gate had been closed behind him.

"He's a little warm," then said Bowser, feeling the flank of the horse. "I'll hitch him here and see what can be done about effecting an entrance. Possibly I shall find a window up, in which case we can readily get in. This way, please."

He led the way toward the house, the young couple following in silence.

"I suppose you have comprehended that your father is a somewhat singular man, Mr. Dabshaw?" ventured the factotum, looking around with an air of sudden confidence.

"Yes, altogether too singular for his own

comfort or anybody else's," answered the son, with the air of being irritated at the situation of affairs. "You can hardly astonish me, Bowser, whatever you may choose to say about him, as between ourselves, you know."

The factotum faced about suddenly and halted, staring earnestly into the faces of the son and Mrs. Dabshaw.

"Are you sure of that, sir?" he asked.

"Perfectly sure, Bowser."

"Do you give me full liberty to tell you all I know?"

Young Dabshaw nodded.

"And will you stand by me, if your father should be angry at my frankness?"

"Most assuredly. Speak!"

"Then allow me to state that your father is the most infamous villain on the earth, either inside or outside of prison!"

If ever a man was dumfounded at an unexpected piece of plain speaking, that man was Charles Dabshaw, at the moment of hearing Bowser's extraordinary statement.

He recoiled abruptly, raising his hands as if to ward off a blow.

Then he rallied and said:

"Will you kindly mention one or more circumstances which bear out the sweeping assertion you have just made, Bowser?"

"I will, sir. To begin with, there is a charming young lady, scarcely seventeen, as pure and sweet as your own wife, as harmless, as kind of heart, as noble and beautiful, who is now lying in the wine-vault of this house, bound hand and foot, and why?"

"And why?" echoed young Dabshaw and his wife in unison, in a shocked whisper.

"Simply because she has refused your father's hand in marriage."

"Really?" murmured young Dabshaw, with a white face, while his young wife clung to his arm in amazement and horror.

"Really and truly," avowed Bowser. "And that is not all. The mother of this young lady has been living here a year past as housekeeper. As she would not force her daughter into the acceptance of your father's suit, he has become very angry with her, and has tried to poison her. That design having miscarried, because he was detected in it, he has taken her prisoner, bound her with cords, and carried her into these great woods, with the intention of leaving her there to be eaten by the wolves during this very night! That is what occupies your father at this very moment!"

Language is powerless to describe the horror these revelations caused young Dabshaw and his wife.

It seemed to be all the young lady could do to maintain herself upon her feet, even with the attentive support her husband gave her.

"I thank you for telling me these things, Bowser," said young Dabshaw, "and beg to say that you shall be in nowise punished by my father for taking this course with us. But let us hasten to the assistance of this young lady."

"There is no window raised, as I see," declared Bowser. "We shall have to break in, if you decide not to wait your father's return."

"Wait! Not a minute—not a single minute!"

The young gentleman picked up a stone and dashed out one of the large panes of glass occupying the lower half of a window.

"Slip in, Bowser," he requested, "and I will pass a large stone to you—or rather a stout post I see lying here."

Bowser obeyed, and young Dabshaw passed to him the post in question.

Then he helped his wife up to the window-sill, and Bowser lent a hand to help her in, the husband bringing up the rear.

"You may lead the way to that wine-vault," then said young Dabshaw. "But the first thing necessary is a lamp."

The lamp was procured promptly, and then Bowser picked up the post.

"This way, please," he invited.

In another minute the trio were in the cellar, halting at the door of the wine-vault.

"You hear?" whispered Bowser.

The young couple listened.

The groans which came from the wine-vault were in the highest degree significant.

"Quick!" exclaimed young Dabshaw, handing the light to his wife. "She may be dying!"

Using the post as a battering-ram, the two men were not long in effecting an entrance and in bringing Olla Dorsett out into the cellar.

"Poor girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Dabshaw, her eyes filling with tears, as she drew the head of the unconscious girl into her lap, while her husband hastened to cut the bonds which enveloped her so tightly. "And this is the way in which she has been treated because she will not accept the hand of a man old enough to be her father."

"I never have known a more horrible series of outrages!" affirmed young Dabshaw, as he poured a liberal dram of brandy down the throat of the insensible girl. "My father must surely be a madman! At least we must treat him as such until his ways are extensively mended. Lead the way up stairs, Cecile. We had better carry the poor girl to the parlor. If

we hadn't come to her rescue just as we did, she would have perished."

Ascending the stairs and passing through the hall to the sitting-room—taking this last measure at Bowser's suggestion—the rescuer laid Olla gently on the lounge which had of late been so much used by her mother.

Here the trio continued their exertions for her restoration to consciousness, and soon had the pleasure of seeing her open her eyes.

"There! you are safe now, Miss Olla," said Mrs. Dabshaw, caressing the maiden's hair. "You are among friends at last. Mr. Dabshaw will persecute you no more. This young gentleman—my husband—will protect you with his life, and so will I."

"And so will I," affirmed Bowser, in a voice husky with emotion. "If I have been cruel to you heretofore, Miss Olla—if I have assisted Dabshaw in his infamous persecutions—it has been because I was afraid of him, and because I did not know what else to do. But this young gentleman will tell you that I have fully enlightened him in regard to his father's wickedness."

"His father's!" exclaimed Olla.

"Yes, miss. I am Charles Dabshaw, the son of your persecutor," avowed the handsome young stranger sternly, "but I beg you to believe that he will have to walk over my dead body before he shall ever raise a finger to your detriment again."

"Oh, what a pity you didn't come sooner!" returned Olla. "You would have saved my poor mother!"

"We'll save her yet," declared young Dabshaw, his face glowing with resolution. "If my father comes out of the woods without her, he will be instantly sent back for her, and Bowser and I will go with him."

The words seemed to give Olla new life, as she seized the hands of Mrs. Dabshaw and pressed them to her heart.

"With such friends I cannot despair," she murmured. "I feel that Heaven will reward your goodness to me."

CHAPTER XXVIII. MASTER AND MAN.

REJOICING at the turn affairs had taken, Bowser excused himself to the man he now regarded as his employer, and took his way out to the stable to care for the newly-arrived horse.

He had completed this task to his liking, and was in the act of drawing the newly-arrived wagon into the carriage-house, when the rumbling of wheels in the direction of the great forest told him that Dabshaw was returning from his expedition.

"As well wait for him here," was Bowser's thought.

Hanging his lanterns in their usual places, one at each side of the door, he waited.

In due course Dabshaw made his appearance. "You needn't have waited for me, Bowser," was his greeting. "I thought that was understood between us!"

"And so it was, sir. But I've been busy."

"How busy?" queried Dabshaw, as he sprung out of his wagon, which had come to a halt just outside the door.

"There has been an arrival here, sir, since your departure."

The announcement was made in a tone of voice which arrested Dabshaw's attention, it was so unlike the tone Bowser had been in the habit of using.

"What sort of an arrival?" he demanded.

"Your son, sir."

"My son? Where is he?"

"In the house."

"Indeed! How did he get in?"

"He took a stone and dashed in pieces one of the panes of a window."

For a moment Dabshaw seemed at a loss what to say or think.

"Sure he's my son?" he then resumed.

"He says he is, and that's all I know about it," answered Bowser. "As you know, I have never seen your son, unless he's the man now here."

"Broke in, did he?"

Bowser assented.

"Perhaps he's a fraud of some kind. How did he come?"

The factotum pointed out the horse and wagon.

"He was alone, of course?" pursued Dabshaw.

"No, sir. His wife is with him."

"His wife? Did he say his wife?"

"He did."

The outlaw looked thunderstruck.

"His intention was to give you a pleasant surprise," added Bowser. "The lady is of course in the house with him."

The outlook had already become very disagreeable to the questioner.

He thought of Olla Dorsett, and a sudden pallor mantled his face.

"Where are my son and his wife now?" he asked.

"In the sitting-room."

Another pause succeeded, Dabshaw stepping about uneasily, as if his feet rested upon live coals.

"Of course you'll have your horse put out," suggested Bowser, giving his attention to the impatient animal. "I'll take care of him, while you hasten to your guests."

"All right—care for him," returned Dabshaw. "But answer another question. Did Charles ask where I was?"

"Naturally."

"And what was your answer?"

"Just what the facts required me to tell him!"

This answer was so unexpected that it caused Harrold Dabshaw to recoil.

"You—you have betrayed me?" he faltered.

"If you choose to call it that—yes!"

"You told Charles I had taken a drive into the woods?"

"Yes, sir."

"And made known the nature of my business in that quarter?"

"I thought it best for your son to know just what the facts are."

A volley of oaths escaped Dabshaw.

His hand clutched nervously at a concealed weapon.

Such a tumult as raged in his soul at that moment he had never before experienced.

"After all—my son is not my keeper," he ejaculated. "And if he chooses to intrude in this surreptitious fashion, so much the worse for him!"

This thought seemed to give him consolation and enable him to recover a portion of his self-control and calmness.

"Did—did you tell him about Olla?" he pursued, after a pause.

"What else could I do? He had only to listen to hear her groans."

"And he has released her?"

"Just as soon as he could."

"How did he get into the wine-vault?"

"We broke in with the end of a beam we took into the house with us."

"And the girl has recovered her senses? She is all right again?"

Bowser nodded.

"And has told her story?"

"She has—or is telling it!"

Dabshaw reeled as if he had received a terrible blow.

For a few moments he seemed dazed, catching at a door-post for support.

"Then Charles knows how I have treated Mrs. Dorsett?" he demanded.

"Of course he does!"

"And how I have tried to force Olla to marry me?"

"No doubt she has told him!"

Dabshaw sunk inertly into a chair which stood on the floor of the stable.

"What a home-coming!" he muttered. "Both for Charles and for me!"

Another silence succeeded, and this time it was a long one.

It was not until Bowser had attended to all the duties devolving upon him, and returned to the door, that Dabshaw aroused from the reverie into which he had fallen.

"What did Charles say?" he then resumed.

"Is he on the war-path?"

"To some extent—yes."

"Go and tell him that I am here, and ask him to come and see me."

The factotum shook his head.

"That is not the best way," he declared. "I would advise you to see Mr. Charles without further delay."

"All right. Go and tell him that I am coming."

"Better come along with me. I will present you to him. You wouldn't know him from Adam if I didn't!"

"True, Bowser. Nor would he know me! What a long time it has been since I saw him! And now to meet him under such strange and painful circumstances—"

The guilty man hesitated, as was natural.

How could he look his son in the face?

How could he meet his son's wife, or even present himself to Olla?

"Come along, I say," said Bowser, taking him by the arm. "We'll soon have it over!"

Dabshaw consented, with a sigh, and the couple closed the door of the stable and took their way toward the house.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FATHER AND SON.

THE meeting that succeeded between the father and son was painfully constrained, as was natural, under the circumstances.

Charles did not pronounce the word "father," or even offer his hand.

His manner, too, was as repellent as the formal "Mr. Dabshaw," by which he addressed his guilty parent.

But the meeting had its compensations.

To begin with, the father experienced a thrill of pleasure at seeing what a tall, handsome man the boy of other days had become.

As bad as he was, too, Harrold Dabshaw was glad to see that the soul looking from the eyes of his son was as unlike his own as possible.

"You have given me quite a surprise, Charles," he declared, after greetings had been exchanged, as he helped himself to a chair.

"But hardly so great a one as you have given me," returned Charles, gloomily. "I had no idea that you were living such a life. I supposed you to be a mine-owner, a cattle-king, or something of the sort, but I find you a robber and assassin!"

Harrold Dabshaw writhed as if exposed to a burning flame.

His face flushed hotly.

"Is it for you to condemn me?" he asked. "Do you know aught of my temptations, the influence of these solitudes, the wrongs which have warped me into the distorted monster you find me?"

"I can divine that you have suffered as well as sinned," answered Charles. "But I have no time to waste in reproaches. The moments are too precious. What we have to do is to undo your terrible work, so far as it can be undone. What have you done with Mrs. Dorsett?"

The outlaw essayed to reply, but no word came from his parched throat.

What he had done was too horrible for avowal in the presence of his son's wife and Olla.

"Have you left her in the woods?" pursued Charles sternly.

The guilty man assented.

"Dead or alive?"

"Alive, of course."

"But bound and helpless?"

Harrold Dabshaw nodded, unable to resist the stern eyes fixed upon him.

"Your idea was that she should be removed forever from your path?" continued Charles. "In a word, that she should be eaten by wolves?"

The miserable wretch covered his face with his hands, while his entire frame trembled violently.

Charles turned to Bowser, who had entered the room with his employer, remaining in a respectful and expectant attitude near the door.

"You have a horse which has not been used, Bowser?" he queried.

The factotum bowed.

"Put him to the wagon Mr. Dabshaw has just been using," ordered Charles. "You will also put in a supply of provisions for a day or two, including wine and such delicacies as you can find in the pantry and store-room."

"I will see to these latter points," said the young wife, arising.

"With my assistance," supplemented Olla, as she also arose. "The task need not be a long one, as I know where everything is to be found."

As the two young ladies withdrew by one door, light in hand, Bowser returned as he had come, leaving the father and son alone.

"I think I understand you, Charles," said Dabshaw, stirring uneasily. "You mean to look for Mrs. Dorsett? In fact, you propose to go to her rescue?"

"Exactly. You can guide us to the spot where you left her?"

"I—I suppose so!"

"I understand your hesitancy, Mr. Dabshaw! You think it is possible that the wolves have already found her!"

"It—it is possible!"

"If they have, so much the worse for you! I shall not hesitate a moment to hand you over to the authorities as a murderer. If harm has happened to Mrs. Dorsett, such will be your fate, so help me Heaven!"

The father sat motionless and silent, but still without anger, and even with a respect and affection he had never before felt for any human being.

"It's a pity I have allowed you to remain away from me so long, Charles," he finally declared. "If you had been here, my life would have been far different!"

"I can well believe it, and I should have certainly been here long ago if I had even suspected what you were doing. I would have saved you from all these horrors!"

"But it is now too late for me to be aught to you, Charles!" groaned the father.

"I do not say that," returned the son. "When Mrs. Dorsett has been found, when she and her daughter are restored to the husband and father, of whose whereabouts you doubtless have some guilty knowledge, I will at least give you credit for a change of heart and character, if your acts attest a sincere and durable repentance."

The outlaw drew a long sigh.

"I will do all in my power, Charles," he declared, "and I can truly say that I regret all my persecutions of the Dorsetts, and, in a general way, all that I have done amiss since I lost your mother. If she had lived, Charles, and if you had remained at home with me, how different would everything have been!"

"When was it, sir, that you allowed this demon of greed and violence and selfishness to take possession of you?" asked the son.

"Not far from ten years ago, and soon after I had placed you at school," explained Dabshaw. "I had been very unlucky as a miner, and had become desperate. One day I joined a man named Roger Wharton, a fellow-miner, for a journey through the great woods. I knew that Wharton had quite a pile of money on his

person, and the fact tempted me beyond endurance. Watching my chance, I gave him a blow with my spade that stretched him senseless at my feet, and then I robbed him and fled!"

The son groaned, with a shudder.

"The blood of Mr. Wharton, then, was the first blood on your hands?" he commented, in a barely audible voice. "But not the last?"

"Yes, the last!"

"Then how did you build this palace?"

"A large portion of the money came from a miner who died in my shanty, after making a splendid strike somewhere in the wilderness—I never knew where, as he hesitated about taking me into his confidence until it was too late. Another portion came from a mine of my own, near at hand, which is now exhausted. As to the balance, it has come from a rich placer I will show you as soon as the business now in hand has been executed."

Charles reflected a moment upon these statements.

He saw no reason to doubt them.

"Of course all I have is yours, Charles," added Dabshaw. "You'll find a will to that effect among my papers!"

"In regard to that matter," replied the son, "I must frankly say that I will never touch another dollar of your money. No poverty can be so biting as to make me exchange it for such unhallowed wealth. Should your property ever be at my disposal, by your death or otherwise, I should give every penny of it to some good charity or to some work of public utility!"

Again Harrold Dabshaw groaned.

This decision was enough to tell him what gulfs lay between him and his son and daughter-in-law.

Another pause succeeded, and it lasted until Bowser made his appearance at the door with a horse and wagon.

"And now to be off, sir," proposed Charles, gaining his feet. "We'll go to the rescue of Mrs. Dorsett, and my one hope and prayer is that we may find her."

We need not pause upon the long and weary quest that succeeded.

Let us hasten to the resorts.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STRANGE GATHERING.

It was nearly night when the strange "King of the Grizzlies" awoke from the slumbers into which he had sunk under the gentle ministrations of Mrs. Dorsett, as related.

How long this day had seemed to the anguished and anxious lady will be readily realized.

It seemed to her, as she thought of the circumstances in which Olla had been left, that she should become as mad as the strange hermit himself.

Once or twice she was tempted to descend into the forest and make an effort to retrace her steps to Dabshaw's, but her better sense and judgment were entirely opposed to this measure.

At other times, she was more than half-decided to arouse the madman and seek to determine him to assist her in her efforts to find her way out of the great wilderness in which she was lost, but as often as she took cognizance of his peaceful rest she could not find heart to disturb him.

And so the day passed.

A stir on the part of the hermit at length aroused her from a painful reverie into which she had fallen, and she turned to see that he had gained his feet.

"What a long sleep!" he ejaculated, as he glanced at the sun. "What witchery there must have been in your fair hand. My subjects have been civil to you?"

"Naturally enough, sir, since I have not dared to go near them," answered Mrs. Dorsett, with a sigh, as she dismissed a half-formed hope that he would awaken more rational. "Shall we now have supper?"

"If such is your pleasure. And after supper I will hang my hammock in the trees in front of the door and watch over your slumbers during the night, leaving you in full possession of the house."

The consideration thus displayed touched Mrs. Dorsett deeply, and she did all she could to express her gratitude—preparing as tempting a supper as her resources permitted, and while away the evening with old-time songs to which her lips had long been strangers.

It was somewhat late in the morning when she awoke, and later still when she had breakfast, as the hermit insisted on securing some fresh game from his traps.

And then the whole forenoon was consumed in a vain attempt to prevail upon him to assist her in an effort to make her way out of the great forest.

He met all her appeals by saying that the forest was as wide as the world, and that it was simply impossible to find a spot where it would cease to be!

Resuming the discussion after dinner, it was not long before Mrs. Dorsett found herself not far from the verge of despair.

Must she live and die in that terrible solitude, with only this poor madman for her companion? Would she ever again see Olla?

As she sat silent and weary, her brain almost reeling with the load of sorrow weighing upon it, she was suddenly aroused by the barking of a dog at no great distance.

How excitedly she gained her feet and listened!

The fact that the barking sounded louder and louder every instant attested that the animal was approaching.

A few moments of intense watching and listening, and the dog appeared to her gaze.

This dog was Demon!

Behind him rode Ned and Bob, no longer in disguise, with Lizzie Wharton between them, and in the rear of the young people rode Dr. Barker and Mr. Dorsett.

As a guide through the great woods the doctor had not only been a complete success, but his "short-cut" had led the party to within a hundred rods of the old hermit's dwelling.

And this point attained, the activity and scent of the sagacious mastiff had done the rest.

The dog had even discovered the presence of the old hermit's grizzlies, and it was particularly to these strange pets that his voice and attention had been directed.

As to Jake Harewood, he had been handed over to a detachment of soldiers the little party had met not long after leaving Big Horn City in the manner related, and Constable Wilkins had decided not to turn his back upon the arch-reprobate until he had seen him safely lodged in prison.

At sight of this cavalcade Mrs. Dorsett could not refrain from tears of joy.

She saw nothing definite, to be sure, so great was still the distance, and so thick were the intervening leaves and branches; and it is doubtful if she could have possibly made out any of the new-comers distinctly, so glad and restless were her glances, and so full were her eyes of tears, but she comprehended the great central truth of the situation.

Relief was at hand!

As to the old hermit, he looked as if he could not receive the evidence of his senses.

"What! human beings!" he cried, hurrying down the path, so as to get a view less obstructed by tree-tops. "A girl and four men! Phantoms, no doubt, like so many others I have seen since I became the last man!"

"No, sir! They're beings of flesh and blood, like ourselves," assured Mrs. Dorsett, as she followed the hermit. "I hoped at first that the girl would prove to be my daughter! There are two young men, it seems, and two—ah, my God! my husband! my husband!"

Forgetting all about the grizzlies, she ran swiftly to meet the new-comers, and in another minute was lying almost unconscious upon the breast of Mr. Dorsett.

"Welcome, all," cried the hermit, advancing more slowly. "Since you really exist, I am glad to see you!"

"Merciful heavens!" cried Ned, as he drew rein and leaped from his horse. "That man is my long-lost father!"

He sprang forward to seize the object of his recognition in a filial embrace, but the old hermit recoiled in visible apprehension.

"Don't you know me, father?" cried Ned, in anguish, holding out his hand. "I'm your son—your own son, Edward! You are greatly—terribly changed! But I remember you as well as if our terrible separation were simply of yesterday! Don't you know me?"

"Of course not," was the answer.

The anguish of Ned was horrible to witness.

"Don't you comprehend, my boy?" cried Dr. Barker, as he also dismounted; "the man is as mad as a March hare."

"And no wonder," said Mrs. Dorsett, looking up from her husband's breast. "You should see what a terrible wound there is on his head."

"You are acquainted with him, madam?" pursued the doctor. "Try to get him to the house, and I will look at the wound in question."

Mrs. Dorsett had no difficulty in carrying out the suggestion, and the hermit was soon induced to lie down upon his lounge, and thus afford the doctor an opportunity of reaching a careful diagnosis.

"A terrible wound, as you said," he exclaimed, when he had examined it. "But the man is no worse off than a patient I treated and cured two weeks ago. If you will give me permission, Ned, I will fetch him out from under that cloud in a few minutes."

Ned nodded assent, with a groan.

The sufferer was soon put under the influence of ether, and the operation was duly performed, the doctor having all the necessary instruments and medicaments with him.

"There! he'll be all right, when the influence of the ether has passed off," said the doctor. "Just wait and watch."

It was not long before the patient came out of his unnatural sleep and started violently, looking wildly around.

"Where is he? where is he?" he cried.

"Where's who?" asked the doctor.

"Dabshaw—Harrold Dabshaw—the miner who struck me with that iron bar; the man who tried to kill me that he might rob me of my money and gold. Where is he, I say? He has robbed me," and he felt of his pockets. "Quick, or he will escape!"

"I will explain what this all means," said Dr. Barker, looking around upon his companions. "This man knows nothing now of what has occurred since he received that blow on the head. His mind goes back to the moment when a miner named Harrold Dabshaw struck him with an iron bar and fractured his skull. Listen."

He turned to the patient and said:

"What is your name, sir?"

"Roger Wharton."

"Have you a son?"

"Yes—a boy of ten."

"What is his name?"

"Edward, or Ned."

"When will you see him again?"

"As soon as I go back East. But tell me, stranger, how did I come by this beard and long hair? Did Dabshaw disguise me in this style? If so, pull it off."

"Would you like to see how you look in a mirror, Mr. Wharton?"

"I don't mind."

"I must warn you that you are greatly changed. You've had a long illness, in fact. It was not to-day that Dabshaw tried to kill you, but ten years ago."

Roger Wharton looked startled.

"Impossible," he cried.

"Look in the glass, and you will have proofs of what I am telling you."

Producing a small pocket-mirror, Dr. Barker held it up to the patient's face.

With what wild consternation he at first stared at his reflection will be easily imagined, but the doctor kept talking to him, and in due course he began to realize the situation.

"Then my boy must be grown up, if he lives," he murmured. "Where is he?"

"Here, father!" cried Ned.

The father turned toward him, as he arose and extended his arms.

"Ah, my God!" cried the father, his glances fixed upon the handsome and radiant face before him. "It is indeed my noble boy! But how changed! No longer a boy, but a man!"

What an embrace was that which followed!

Father and son wept with delight.

The meeting to both was like a return from the grave.

"And—and your mother, Ned?" asked the father, in a hesitating tone, as soon as he could find voice.

"Dead, father—long years ago! The terrible mystery of your silence and absence was too much for her to endure. She faded and died!"

Again they mingled their tears.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CONCLUSION.

At this moment another furious outburst of barking from Demon resounded, calling the entire party out of the hut.

Following the example of the dog, all looked down into the woods, in a direction nearly opposite to that from which Ned and his party had arrived.

"Ah! those horrible grizzlies!" cried Roger Wharton, in a startled voice. "What a sight!"

It was evident that he had never before been consciously aware of their presence!

"What Demon is announcing can only be those new arrivals," said the doctor. "See! a young gentleman and two ladies!"

The young gentleman was Charles Dabshaw, and the two young ladies were his wife and Olla Dorsett.

The search upon which they had entered, as related, had led them to this result.

"They see us now," added Dr. Barker. "They even seem to know us, or to be interested in us. See how eagerly they are approaching! One of them is looking at you, Mrs. Dorsett—"

He was interrupted by a wild scream that came up from below.

"That voice!" cried Mrs. Dorsett, with a wild start. "See, husband! It is Olla!"

It was indeed Olla, in all her beauty and radiance, who was so rapidly flying up the steep path to the arms of her long-lost father as well as to those of her mother!

"Oh, joy! Alive, papa, as I have always believed!" was her greeting. "I knew Heaven would be merciful! I have never ceased to assure mamma that you would some day be restored to us! Oh! what gladness!"

And in another moment she lay in his encircling arms in a state of rapture for which language has no adequate expression.

Not far away, following her lead, were young Dabshaw and his wife, clinging to each other with tears of gladness.

And still further away was seen a fourth figure—that of Harrold Dabshaw—which was suddenly seen to halt in the midst of the great shadows cast by the forest.

Clearly enough, he did not wish to be seen.

Clearly enough, he had no lot or part in the scene of rejoicing upon which his eyes rested.

"Ah! that man!" he gasped, recoiling from the contemplation of Roger Wharton. "He still lives, it seems! The blow I gave him, all these years ago, as we took that lonely trail through the forest, did not kill him!"

He stood as if entranced, oblivious of the approach of one of the old hermit's pets, which had fixed its eyes upon him.

"And that other man," he resumed, in a hollow whisper—"ah! I know him only too well! He is another of my victims! He is Gideon Dorsett! so long our prisoner in the deserted mine! He, too, in some way unknown, has recovered his liberty, and under what circumstances! That is his wife beside him! That is his daughter in his arms! How happy they all are! What have I to do here, or with such a scene? No one looks at me! After all the injuries I have inflicted upon them, my victims do not even seem to know that I exist! I will go!"

He turned on his heel abruptly—only to find himself face to face with an enormous grizzly!

There was a sudden movement on the part of the ferocious beast, and Harold Dabshaw found himself pinched! Then a few more movements of that red mouth and those long claws, and that terrible man of crime lay an inert mass at the grizzly's feet. There was a rush of many foot-steps toward him, as his last cries rung out, but long before any one could reach him his wicked soul had gone to its final account!

When Gideon Dorsett at length released his daughter from the fond embrace in which he had clasped her, he beckoned Ned to come near, and said:

"Here is the young hero, darling, who has restored me to you, and I trust your gratitude to him will always correspond to the affection you bear your father."

Ned warmly pressed the hand offered him, and as he looked into the tearful eyes of its beauteous owner, he knew that he had met his fate!

It was easy for Mrs. Dorsett, after her experiences with the "old hermit," to explain to Roger Wharton the strange life he had been living in that lone hut, as the "King of the Grizzlies," and in the course of an hour or two he had arrived at a very good conception of it.

In due course Lizzie Wharton and Bob Carpenter were united in marriage, but not until the young detectives had taken from *The Golden Jar* and other rich placers all the gold they were likely to need for long years to come.

In regard to their great secret of extracting gold from quartz with corrosive alkaloid, it is enough to say that they are gradually extending their process into the great mining centers, receiving a splendid royalty for its use, and it is reasonable to presume that they will in due course accumulate one of the largest fortunes known to human annals.

The marriage of Ned and Olla was the occasion of as much rejoicing to Roger Wharton, as to Mr. and Mrs. Dorsett, and there are no happier firesides in the world than those where all these useful and honored lives are centered.

Demon is still the delight of the little Carpenters and Whartons, and bids fair to perform his curious feats and antics for many years to come.

Hy Gummel and Jake Harewood were duly visited by the sword of retributive justice—the first losing his life, and the last his liberty—and the entire Harewood gang, with many others, was wholly rooted out and destroyed.

Young Dabshaw and his wife are among the most honored citizens of the village growing up around the palatial mansion which was once devoted to a terrible miscreant's villainy, but which is now turned to the best of accounts as a public school.

THE END.

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